

# Crossroads OF Desire



by AMOS HATTER

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# CROSSROADS OF DESIRE

by Amos Hatter



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LONDON

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## CHAPTER ONE

**H**ER guests, that wintry afternoon, numbered a dozen odd. That they were important people was beside the point. They were still odd and Connie was fed up. It didn't make any difference to her that the skiny old gent with the white hair owned a fair-sized bank of Manhattan. He was a bore. And Mrs. Switzer, the well-upholstered matron who dipped with five carat diamonds, was, in Connie's book, a nosy, narrow-minded old hag.

As for fame, Connie could match anyone in the room. Indeed, her brilliant performances as premiere danseuse of the Ballet du Roi made her the current sensation of the New York theatrical world. Constance Carlier was not a name to be tossed off lightly. Yet here she was stuck again for at least two hours with Philip Hathaway's friends.

Had they known that Philip was paying for the party they would have been surprised and undoubtedly shocked. Connie was damned if she was going to lay out any of her own hard-earned cash to provide them with whiskey sores. And had they known that Philip was also paying for Connie's apartment they would have been downright horrified.

Such a practical arrangement bothered Connie not at all. Philip was actually kicking in a lot more than that toward her well-being. If he kept on insisting that she have his stupid friends in for cocktails every couple of weeks, she was going to assess him even further for the wear and tear on her nerves.

"My dear," asked Mrs. Switzer in a patronising tone, "where do you get your amazing vitality? I saw your performance in *Libretto* last week and it was positively breathtaking, the leaps that you did."

Connie swallowed the stuffed olive from her Martini and put down the glass. Now, how the hell do you answer a question like that? She shrugged.

"I guess it's just a matter of staying in condition."

"Ballerinas never cease to astonish me. Such grace and beauty yet withal such endurance. Physically, I swear, you can take the measure of most men. How about that, Howard?" asked Mrs. Switzer, laughing raucously.

"How was that?" The skinny old gent with the white hair bent his head to Mrs. Bentner.

Connie moved on to the other guests. Her small, dainty stature was lovely to behold. Her dark, oval eyes, high cheek bones and the way her shining, black hair was combed back from her well shaped forehead had an irresistible attraction for men. Her low pitched voice was young, vibrant and electric.

Presently the buzzer heralded the arrival of more guests at the cocktail party and Yvonne, the French maid, answered the summons. Connie glanced toward the door of her apartment to see who else she was going to have to put up with. She was pleasantly surprised at the appearance of one of the young male dancers who was in the Ballet de la Rex troupe. As an extra filip he had in tow a young man whom Connie had never seen before.

"Hello, Jack. Glad you could come by," Connie greeted.

Jack Clayton smiled. "It was nice of you to ask me, Connie. Hope you don't mind my bringing along a friend. This is Larry Brooks. Miss Constance Carter."

Connie looked up at Larry Brooks and didn't mind Jack's bringing him at all. Thus far, he was the only interesting looking man in the room. Tall, slender and pleasantly informal in a sport jacket, Larry Brooks was the sort most women pay attention to.

"Glad to meet you, Miss Carter," he said as his large, blue eyes beheld her with flattering attention.

"Thank you," Connie replied, rewarding him with a dazzling smile. "Come on. Have a drink. What do you like?"

"I'll have a scotch and water," said Jack.

"And how about you, Larry?" Connie asked.

"A glass of beer, please."

Connie, who had turned to signal to Yvonne, stopped. Her incredibly long dark lashes fluttered. Her eyes travelled back to Larry Brooks and regarded him with astonished amusement.

"You like beer?"

He grinned and nodded. "I guess it's because I'm more used to it."

"I hope Yvonne can scare some up."

"Oh, that's all right. If you haven't any, just a plain highball will do."

Connie permitted her eyes to regard the young man for another instant. She liked what she saw. There was no pretense whatever in his slender boyish face. What intrigued Connie even more was his total lack of tribute toward her. Most young men, meeting the famous Constance Carter for the first time, knocked themselves out trying to impress her. This guy was just being himself.

"Yvonne," said Connie, "bring Mr. Clay on a scotch highball and can you scare up a glass of beer for Mr. Brooks?"

"I think so, mademoiselle," Yvonne replied in her delightful French accent.

The maid went off. Jack turned to greet Nina Hake, director of the Ballet de Rex. Connie glanced up at Larry. His eyes were following the retreating figure of Yvonne who, in dark hose, high heels, black uniform and white apron, was by no means to be taken for granted. Larry Brooks looked at Connie and grinned.

"I'll introduce you to some of these other folks," said Connie quickly.

She felt a bit piqued. Yvonne had lots on the ball but no visitor in this apartment had ever looked at her in the same way they had looked at Connie.

During the introductions Connie was called to the telephone. She left Larry in Jack's care and went into her bedroom. She picked up the instrument and said irritably, "Yes?"

"Connie, darling, it's going to be impossible for me to get by—"

"That's a helluva note. You're the one who wanted this party," Connie interrupted. "What am I supposed to do?"

"A thousand apologies but here's how it is. Bobbin Walker, a salesman, insisted that I meet a friend of his and it was just common courtesy that I do so," said Philip Hathaway. "I'll send my car around to pick you up at six thirty and meet you at the Penthouse Club for dinner at seven sharp."

"What am I supposed to do with all the fat heads who are cluttering up my living room?" Connie demanded.

"They know you've got to be at the theater at eight thirty," Philip replied in a worried voice. "They'll be smiling off in plenty of time. Please, dearest, forgive me. It won't ever happen again."

"It better not," said Connie grimly.

"Then you'll meet me?"

"I've got to eat some places."

She put down the receiver. Sometimes she had the feeling that Philip was more bother than he was worth to her. One of these days she was going to set things straight, reorganize. She had fought and clawed her way to fame and fortune in her profession, only to find such high estate devoid of warmth and happiness. Philip, of course, had been a necessary stepping stone, the whole foundation, in fact, for her success. There was an unholy alliance between her achievements and his wealth. Something had to be done about that!

Connie returned to the living room a few minutes later. She scanned the gathering quickly and discovered Larry Brooks standing alone by her grand piano contemplating one of her rehearsal scores. She joined him.

"Do you know music?" she asked.

"A little, but not stuff like that." He removed his eyes from the sheet music and gave her a whimsical smile. "Ragtime is my speed."

"Then you're a musician."

Larry nodded. "I manage to eke out a living at it."

"Really. Where do you play?" Connie inquired with interest.

"In O'Brien's saloon over on Third Avenue."

"I think that's marvelous."

He shot her a quick glance, his eyes suddenly wary. His tone changed and she detected a tinge of bitterness in his words. "You do? Then drop around some evening. See how the other half lives."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way." Inexplicably Connie's heart skipped a beat. Her large, expressive eyes beseeched him for forgiveness. "I—I meant anyone who can play good enough—" She bit her lip. Hardly anything she could say would atone for the way her words must have sounded to him.

"You don't have to feel sorry about me. I'm quite happy playing in a saloon. It's the first real satisfaction I've ever had from my music."

"Won't you play something? Please," she begged, motioning to the piano.

"This isn't my kind of audience. Not my kind at all," he said, glancing around at the other guests.

"But I like ragtime."

"You'd better not let your public find that out. It would be something of a shock, to say the least." He looked up and spoke as if quoting from a newspaper. "The great Constance Carter epitome of the dance, future boggle-woogles."

Connie's lower lip protruded in a pout. She gazed at him from narrowed eyes. "Up to now I liked you."

That pronouncement had little effect on Larry Brooks. "I still like you, Miss Carter. I've never seen you dance but the pictures of you on billboards are very agreeable to look at, and very classical."

Connie did not reply. She continued to study him. She had never met a young man who, in such a short space of time made her happy, jealous, angry and uncertain.

At that moment they were interrupted by a couple who thanked Connie for a delightful afternoon and took their leave. Hoke reminded everyone that Connie had a performance tonight and the party began breaking up. She had no opportunity for further conversation with Larry. Mrs. Switzer was the last to go and when Connie turned away from the door she had to hustle to get ready for her dinner engagement with Philip.

She visualized Larry Brooks as she stood under her shower. He was good looking, yet not at all handsome. It bothered her that she kept thinking about him. There were a thousand young men in New York with ten thousand more possibilities yet, no one had so quickly aroused her interest and attention.

Ten minutes later she rolled her nylon stockings up over her beautiful and muscular thighs and fastened the tops to her garter belt. Quickly she got into a dark, fitted dress. When she entered the living room, Yvonne was already standing at the door with her trunk coat.

"You look lovely tonight, mademoiselle," the maid smiled.

Connie slipped into the cloak. As she drew on her gloves she turned and contemplated the French girl. She was attractive. There was no getting around that. Attractive and quite feminine. It was easy to see why Larry had looked at her.

"So do you, and that's not just my opinion."

Constance Carter left her suite on the eleventh floor of the Winston Arms. Her, the elevator man, bowed as she entered the car and maintained a dignified silence as they descended to

the main floor. Connie swept through the lobby, her firm chin high. A chauffeured limousine awaited her at the curb under the unopposed entrance. Ten minutes later she got out at the Penthouse Club where Philip was anxiously awaiting her.

He was a heavy-set individual of medium height and expensive tailoring. His hair was sandy and his small brown eyes were covered by shell-tipped glasses. Philip had been born to the minor thirty-six years ago, as free and equal as any other infant American. With traditional Hathaway acumen he had, seven years ago, inherited the presidency of the Hathaway Lock and Bolt Company of New England and succeeded in making himself even more free and equal.

"I'm dazedly sorry about this afternoon, Connie," he apologized instantly.

"You should be." She gave him a look of supreme disfavor that sent chills of apprehension down his back.

"It just couldn't be helped—"

"That's what you said," she snapped.

Philip opened his mouth to say something more. But on second thought he decided there was nothing to be gained by further verbal apology. He took Connie's arm and piloted her to the elevator. Five minutes later they sat at a table high above Central Park.

"What mood was Mrs. Bentler in today?" he asked, when the waiter had departed with their orders.

"As dreary as ever."

"She shouldn't have been. Do you know the show turned in a profit last week for the first time? I've already mailed out checks to the other backers."

"If that's the case I want an increase. It's worth double what I'm making, having that bunch of toads in for cocktails whenever you take a notion."

"I'm afraid an increase is impossible for a while, Connie," he said disturbed.

Philip, in addition to other things, was a patron of the arts. Specifically he was interested in promoting the ballet. Actually—and he had never admitted this even to himself—it was not so much the ballet as it was the glamorous Connie who had attracted him to the terpsichorean art.

As chairman, and heaviest contributor, to the Ballet du

Roit Association, Philip wielded considerable influence. It was he who had suggested Connie as the premiere danseuse. And after the first week even the dubious Holke had agreed that Philip knew a talented dancer when he saw one. If this came as a surprise to Philip he did not let on. All he knew was that Connie's legs were the prettiest he had ever beheld and that she was, at the same time, an ambitious ballerina.

With last week's newly earned surplus of nine hundred dollars, Philip was now only twenty-one thousand in the hole as a result of his ballet venture. He had hopes of recouping that in due time. It was exclusive, of course, of the rest of Connie's apartment which he hoped to get back in ways other than cash.

"Well," said Connie, after a few moments, "I'm through with cocktail parties. That's final. If the backers can't buy themselves some drinks, they oughtn't to be in on the deal."

"You were a dear to carry the load this afternoon, Connie. Believe me, I'll never leave you in the lurch again." He reached across the table and patted her hand.

Presently their food was brought in. Connie always ate sparingly before a performance. While Philip treated himself with a medium rare steak, she daintily partook of a shrimp salad. Tonight, after the show, she'd eat like a farm hand during a harvest.

"We're getting ready to expand our facilities up at the factory," Philip explained, "and the fellow I had to see this afternoon sells equipment."

He talked on, as they ate, about his plans for expansion. Connie listened for a while but soon lost interest in what he was saying. Fifteen minutes later Philip finished his steak and sat back.

"... And so you can see," he concluded, "that I've got a job cut out for me this year. The whole project will run well over three quarters of a million dollars."

Connie had been staring out over the lights of Central Park that twinkled brilliantly in the cold, clear night. She looked at Philip, who was pleased that the mention of such large sums had impressed her.

"Have you ever heard of O'Brien's saloon?" she asked.

Philip gaped at her. "Why—why no. I don't believe I have."

"It's somewhere on Third Avenue."

"It is?"

"Yes and I want you to take me there after the show tonight, Philip."

It was so evident that Connie made a request of him these days that he was elated and only too glad to oblige. That, however, did not accommodate his bewilderment.

"But why to a saloon on Third Avenue? Is the food supposed to be extra good, or something?"

"Yes. That's it," said Connie smiling for the first time that evening. "And you know how hungry I'll be by midnight."

A great tenderness and yearning came into Philip's eyes as he gazed across the table at this enchanting little dancer. Her eyes were like magic pools, holding love and fulfillment in their clear depths. Her enormous vitality, if ever properly unleashed, could provide Philip with undreamed-of delights forevermore.

"I'll take you to O'Brien's saloon after the show tonight, my dear. I'll take you anywhere in the world," he announced with restored confidence.

## CHAPTER TWO

A CROWD was milling under the brightly lighted marquee of the Avon Theater when Connie and Philip arrived at a quarter after eight. The *Streetway* Room Only sign had been hung up three weeks ago and orchestra seats went for a premium right up to curtain time. The reason for all the hubbub was a single scene in the ballet *Lebelle* starring Miss Constance Carter.

The Ballet du Roi was a troupe of competent dancers but the critics had been unimpressed until Connie came along. What did it was the *Lebelle* love scene between Connie and her male partner. The background was that of a forest with Connie in the role of nymph fleeing the advances of a love-crazed satyr.

The twist that held the audience entranced and brought raves from the critics was that the nymph, for a change, suddenly seduced the satyr. In such a character Connie had proven herself superb. Right up to the last minute she was

beauty pursued by the beast. An then the tables were turned. What happened to the satyr after that was already a Broadway legend.

Some ventured the opinion that the thing was pretty risqué. Others said that was putting it mildly. The unhappy censors, caught between popular demand and the mores of fine art, decided they'd have no more luck condemning the Ballet du Roi than they would Cellini's cell shaker and tactfully withheld all comment.

Connie hurried along the stage alley between high brick walls, nodded companionably to the guard at the door and entered. She did not, as was her custom, go at once to her private dressing room. Instead, she stepped around into the wing of the stage and peered at the performers who were beginning to lumber up for the first number.

"Hey, Jack," she called, "come over here a minute."

Jack Clayton ceased doing knee bends and joined her. "Flue party you gave this afternoon, Connie."

She ignored that. "Who is that fellow Larry Brooks you brought along?"

"Larry?" Jack grinned. "He's a guy from my old home town, Springfield, Illinois. French of a fellow but he hasn't had much luck here in New York."

"He told me he plays the piano."

"That's right. He came here a couple of years ago to be a concert pianist but it didn't pay off."

"Have you ever been to O'Brien's where he plays?"

Jack nodded. "It's not a bad joint. Anything but fancy. Not in your class at all."

"I don't know about that. Is the food any good?"

"Cheap but nourishing," Jack laughed. "Don't tell me you're going there."

"Larry invited me to drop around."

"Oh brother! I'd like to see O'Brien's face when he recognizes you. There hasn't been a celebrity in there since prohibition."

"The Larry Brooks," she said, eyeing him speculatively, "is he engaged, or in love or anything?"

"It's a pal of one of the waitresses over there. That's all I know. What's it all about, Connie? Did you go for the guy?"

She shook her head. "No. I was just curious."

In her dressing room a few moments later Connie began removing her clothes. But her mind was still on Larry Brooks. She too was from the mid-west. Overland, Missouri, to be exact. Like Larry, she had arrived in the Big Town a little over two years ago. Things hadn't been easy in the beginning.

She had answered chorus calls, danced in honky-tonks and for one bitter month had worked as a salesgirl in a lingerie shop. Connie knew the heartbreak and disillusionment of Broadway. But the similarity of her experience to Larry's ended there. For she also knew success. A success far more spectacular than she had ever thought possible. What a pity he hadn't succeeded, too. Maybe she could do something about that.

Connie's first appearance of the evening featured her in a fast moving, modern dance. She was on again in a classical number wearing a short ballet skirt. The audience gave her a thunderous ovation both times as if urging the show on to the long awaited climax.

For the main number Connie got into a skin-tight costume that covered her gorgeous curves as if applied with an air brush. She applied make-up to her face with meticulous care, made a final check of her toe shoes and the ribbons tying her ankles. Even the supporting cast felt a ripple of excitement as she joined them in the wings.

Quickly now the ballerinas assumed their positions, waddling with the peculiar gait of all feminine dancers. Connie stood poised awaiting the lifting of the curtain and the cue from the orchestra conductor in the pit. The music began. The lights were dimmed. Connie leaped onto the stage and the dance began.

What the audience beheld from their side of the footlights was a thing of rare beauty and grace. The dancers moved with a poetry of motion that blended with the music. And Connie, featured in the spotlight, danced as if inspired with eternal youth.

Suddenly her male partner appeared from center stage in his grotesquerie of a satyr and the main action began. The other dancers disappeared until only the nymph and the satyr remained. The tempo of the dancing increased as Connie fled back and forth with the satyr hot on her heels.

Now she was caught. The satyr flung her to his shoulder,

over and around until sheer motion was created for the open mouthed patrons. The nymph was indeed in a bad way by now and the satyr grinned.

But wait! The final creature that was about to fall into his power turned on the satyr. The surprised satyr stepped back. There followed such a chase as to make the first one look silly. The music swelled to a deafening crescendo as Connie pulled her quarry down and placed one foot triumphantly upon him.

Drums, whistles and cheers created a terrific din as the curtain descended. The audience was on its feet, yelling and applauding. Connie and her partner arose panting like a couple of over-taxed steam engines. They took three bows, appearing to the audience as if they were fresh as daisies. Actually they were both perspiring freely and anxious to be rid of each other.

Connie was still breathing heavily when she reached her dressing room. She was pulling on a kimono when Philip burst in.

"You were a sensation tonight, Connie!" he exclaimed, his eyes sweeping over her with reverent adulation. "It was out of this world!"

"Shut up and give me a cigarette," she said petulantly. She didn't like him to barge in on her with such a proprietary air.

"Here you are," he said whipping out a gold cigarette case and holding a lighter for her.

Her eyes brushed him disdainfully, then lowered to the flame. She took a deep drag, pulled her kimono around her and sat down for a moment's rest. A cloud of blue smoke from her lungs filled the air.

"What prompted such a magnificent performance tonight?" he asked.

"Maybe it's the lousy weather," she said, not looking at him. Philip stared at her in confusion. Presently his eyes brightened. "Robert Walker, that salesman who detained me this afternoon, came to the theater tonight with a friend. I saw them during an intermission. He's invited us to be his guests at the Copa for supper."

"I told you earlier that I wanted to go to O'Brien's."

"Look, Connie. I made some inquiry about that place. It's nothing but a dump. Why on earth do you want to go there?"

She turned her head and regarded him evenly. "I just do."

"But somebody must have given you a bum steer. The food



is downright mediocre and their drinks are quite commonplace. Really, my dear, I don't think you'd enjoy it at all."

Philip saw the tiny sparks that leaped into her eyes. And he knew from the tone of her voice that her mind was made up. He was still fearful, though, that she had made a mistake about O'Brien's and wanted to head her off. She would be more out of sorts than ever if she couldn't have a good meal tonight. And for reasons of his own Philip didn't want her that way.

"It's not even considered a second-rate place. Nobody goes there," he argued gently.

"Are you going to take me there," Connie glared at him suddenly, "or would you rather I went by myself?"

Philip retreated before this outburst. His eyes were round and startled. He had seen her in a temper before. Too many times. And he knew the consequences. He recovered and spoke to her as softly as possible.

"Naturally, darling, if it means that much to you, I'll gladly take you."

Connie sprang to her feet. She paced across the small dressing room.

"Okay, okay," she cried impatiently. "Now get the hell out of here so I can get dressed. We're going to O'Brien's and that's that!"

"Yes. Of course." Philip fumbled with the doorknob. Just before he left he turned. "Would you mind if Robbin Walker and his friend join us?"

"I don't give a damn if you invite the stagehands and the others and the orchestra for good measure. Get out of here!" she lashed back at him. "Get out! Do you hear me?"

Philip pulled the door shut and stood in the small corridor outside. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. What on earth had gotten into Connie, anyhow? Still confused and utterly bewildered he went to seek out Robbin Walker and invite him and his girl friend to go with them to O'Brien's.

Connie continued to pace her dressing room until her anger had subsided. She knew she had acted badly with Philip. But how much of him could she stand?

It wasn't that she had no regard for the guy. She just never had had very much to begin with. His money was something entirely different and, the trouble was, she had to take him along with it. She conceded that he had some things in his

favor. He was attentive, dependable and considerate at all times. Too considerate to suit Connie's idea of a man.

She dismissed him from her mind as she began getting dressed. With some anticipation she looked forward to her visit to O'Brien's and a well done steak with a glass of beer on the side. Forty-five minutes later, a long, dark veil drawn over her lustrous eyes, her mink coat hugging her body, she left her dressing room and went out to join Philip and his friends.

They were waiting for her in the foyer. Philip looked at her carefully as she came up to them and was relieved to see that she had calmed down. He introduced her to a large, flashy blonde named Ginger Doss; and to Robbin Walker, a middle-aged man whose wavy hair had turned gray but whose delicate features gave him a young look.

"I've heard a lot about you, Miss Carter," said Walker politely, "and after seeing you dance tonight I can understand why. It was most entertaining."

"Thank you," said Connie.

"Entertaining and in some respects educational," Ginger Doss spoke up with a wide grin.

Connie looked at her. The girl had more in mind than her words revealed. And Connie suspected that it was not entirely complimentary.

"I'm sorry I've kept you all waiting so long. Shall we go now?" They went out to Philip's limousine which was waiting at the curb. He gave the chauffeur the address. They rode across town and turned north on Third Avenue. A few moments later the car stopped and they got out in front of a shabby looking tavern. A small neon sign hung in the window indicating that this was O'Brien's.

"Who suggested coming to a dump like this?" asked Ginger Doss, staring at the place.

"Connie heard about it from somebody," Philip explained.

"Somebody who had it in for you?" The blonde snarled at her suddenly.

Connie gave the girl a sharp, deadly glance but said nothing. She started for the entrance and the others followed. Robbin Walker held the door open for them.

"Appearances are sometimes deceptive. The food may be excellent," he said cheerfully.

Whatever O'Brien's was, it was certainly nothing fancy. It

was a long narrow room with a bar along one side and booths lining the opposite wall. Further back were some tables with red checkered cloths. A few of the tables and booths were occupied and three men and one girl sat at the bar.

"Good evening," said O'Brien, recovering from his surprise at the sight of such well-dressed patrons. He was a slender man with a pale brown mustache and watery blue eyes.

"May we have a table for four, please," Philip requested, taking charge. "And I trust we can depend on getting some decent food here."

"Yes, sir. Most assuredly."

O'Brien led them back to a table. When they were seated he began issuing orders to a waitress and a bus boy. He snapped his fingers at the bartender, calling him to attention. The help hurried to do his bidding for they too realized that this was a party of guests superior to the sort who usually came here.

Connie didn't even look at the menu that was handed to her. Instead she looked around curiously, at the old upright piano in the back of the room. She glanced at the people who sat at the other tables and searched the faces of those at the bar. Larry Brooks was nowhere in sight. A wave of disappointment passed through her.

"What looks good to you, my dear?" Philip asked.

"The usual, I guess," she said tentatively.

"Bring her the finest steak you've got and champagne cocktails all around while we're waiting," Philip ordered.

"I'd rather have a beer," said Connie.

Philip stared at her in disbelief. Something had gotten into her. He was sure of it now. But he rightly figured that this was not the time to get it out of her. He nodded to O'Brien who was personally taking their orders.

"One glass of beer and three champagne cocktails."

A few moments later the orders were completed and O'Brien hurried off. The four of them sat at the table looking around, then presently their eyes came back to their own group.

"Will someone please explain what we're doing in this fly trap?" Ginger demanded.

"I think it's rather quaint," Walker smiled quickly.

His eyes travelled around the table but when they reached the blonde they changed almost imperceptibly from brightness

to a level interest. It was as if he were giving her a silent warning to shut up.

"As Rob says, the food may be fine," said Philip, a highly dubious expression on his face. "I hope it will be, for your sake, Connie," he added solemnly.

Connie was about to make it clear that anyone who wanted to could leave. Nobody would hold them here. But at that instant the front door opened and Larry Brooks came in. He didn't have on a hat and his attitude seemed to indicate that he had just stepped out a few minutes before.

"It will be," she said, smiling suddenly.

And to the surprise of her three companions she began talking interestingly about her performance that night. Connie was an artful raconteur when she put her mind to it and she proceeded now to make both Philip and Walker glad they had come. Ginger Dees was not deceived. She knew the dancer had something in her craw but was at a total loss as to what it might be.

"Well, upon my word! Look who's here," exclaimed a masculine voice a couple of minutes later.

They all looked up at Larry Brooks who was standing by the table smiling down at Connie. She smiled back pleasantly and informally, then introduced him to the others.

"He plays the piano here," she added, by way of explanation.

"So that's the attraction," Ginger commented, a slow smile forming on her lips.

Larry chose to answer her remark himself. With a deprecating smile he said, "There are some doubts among the customers as to whether it's an attraction or not. But some folks seem to like it. We're honored to have you all here tonight. If you have any requests—ragtime that is—just let me know."

He walked over to the piano and sat down. A few seconds later he began to play. It was immediately apparent that Larry was a master of the instrument. Furthermore, he knew his ragtime rhythm. He rendered "Mapleleaf Rag" with such a melodious beat that nearly all the patrons in O'Brien's were tapping their feet before he had finished.

He played on, pausing for only a brief moment between numbers. Connie ate her steak with zest. An hour later Philip glanced at his watch and suggested that it was time they go.

Connie agreed. She had inflicted her will upon him enough today. She smiled at them all.

"Well, are you sorry we came to O'Brien's?"

"Not at all, my dear," said Philip. "It's been a happy little experience."

"We've enjoyed it immensely," said Robin Walker, but from the look on Ginger's face it was doubtful that she shared his opinion.

Connie excused herself and went to the powder room, having previously noted that to get there she would have to pass close by the piano. Larry was in the midst of a tune and she waved at him gaily as she passed. Inside she gave herself a brief glance in the mirror, hastening to the end of the music. The moment it was over she breezed out, ostensibly to rejoin her companions.

"Enjoyed your playing a lot," she said.

Larry arose instantly and smiled. "Thanks. It was good of you to drop in, Miss Carter."

She eyed him a moment then lowered her tone a bit so that her words fell on his ear alone. "Frankly, there was a purpose in my coming here to listen to you."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," she began improvising rapidly, "we're putting together a new ballet. Sort of a 'Frankie and Johnnie' thing. Would you be interested in helping out with the music?"

"Why—" he began, surprised. "I might—"

"Good. Can you drop around to my place about three tomorrow afternoon?"

Larry blinked. "I guess I could—"

"Splendid. See you then."

With that Connie sailed off and rejoined her party which was waiting near the door of the saloon. When they rode off in Philip's limousine she was in great good spirits and readily agreed to stop off at the Copa, for Ginger's sake.

### CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Yvonne tip-toed into her mistress's bedroom to lower the window at one o'clock the following afternoon, Connie was already awake. She had been lying there for twenty

minutes, smiling up at the ceiling, her eyes bright with anticipation. Now she sat up, to Yvonne's surprise, and threw back the fluffy pink comforter.

"Mademoiselle is awake early today," Yvonne observed smiling.

"That isn't all mademoiselle is. I'm hungry to boot."

She leaped out of the large double bed onto the thick, gray carpet. Her glossy, swart body was covered only as far as her hips by a brief "shorty" night gown that was slit on the sides. Impulsively she did a quick pirovette and filled her lungs with the fresh, cold air. The points of her beautifully rounded breasts pushed against the cloth that covered them.

"Will you have your breakfast in bed?" Yvonne asked.

"Not on your life. Fix it for me in the breakfast room. Pour yourself a cup of coffee too, Yvonne."

Connie folded her arms and grabbed the sides of her nightgown. She lifted it off and over her head and stood naked, yet proud and unashamed, in front of her maid. It was nothing new to Yvonne. She closed the window and went out to prepare breakfast as Connie went through five minutes of vigorous limbering up exercise.

After a bracing, cold shower Connie drew on a large, quilted robe. She slipped her small feet into a pair of high heeled slippers and crossed the living room to the kitchen. Her breakfast was awaiting her.

"Sit down, Yvonne," said Connie gaily as she attacked a plate of scrambled eggs. "Tell me, how are you getting along with Gene these days?"

The little French maid joined her mistress. During the four months period that Yvonne had been in her service, Connie had never been able to look upon her entirely as a servant. Quite possibly because both girls were young, an informal camaraderie existed between them. They had on more than one occasion exchanged confidences about men.

"Gene," said Yvonne, making it sound like "sheen," "sometimes I think I could kill him."

"Don't tell me you've had another fight."

"No, no. But he's such an un dependable fellow. Last night he was supposed to come here but do you know what happened?" Yvonne pursed her lips and her eyes grew narrow.

"He stood you up."

"That's exactly what he did! He phoned me at eight to say he must remain all the evening at the United Nations."

"But why?"

"That," said Yvonne indignantly, "is what made me angry all inside. The wife of one of the French officials needed a letter written in English. He remained away from me to do that!"

"Shame on him," Connie laughed. "How would you like to take the afternoon off? Go over there and give him a piece of your mind."

"Oh, I couldn't do that."

"At least you could take the afternoon off. Thank goodness, we don't have to throw a cocktail party this afternoon."

"But there is cleaning to be done and—"

"Let it wait."

Connie finished her breakfast and drew a package of cigarettes out of the pocket of her robe. She lit one and sipped her coffee. Presently she looked across the table at Yvonne and smiled.

"Well, are you going to take the afternoon off or have I got to kick you out?"

The two girls exchanged significant glances. Gradually a smile appeared on Yvonne's lips. She tilted her head to one side.

"Oui. I'll go, mademoiselle. And when shall I return?"

"At six, if you wish. But no sooner."

Yvonne nodded and discreetly said no more. Connie finished her coffee and cigarette, then arose. Just before she went out of the kitchen she turned.

"It might be well if you mix up a small bottle of Martini before you leave. Put them in the refrigerator to chill."

"And a small plate of hors d'oeuvres!" Yvonne smiled.

"No. That won't be necessary," Connie said.

Connie returned to her bedroom. She went to a closet and got out a thin black jersey with matching tights and a leotard. For a moment she held them both in front of her, pondering. Both had advantages but she tried to decide which would appeal most to Larry. She favored the leotard.

The jersey and tights were the thing. It would provide her with a more professional appearance and lend substance to the fiction that she was actually working on a new ballet. She removed her robe and pulled the black jersey over her head.

Then she pulled on the long tights and slipped them about her slender waist.

She spent some time with her make-up and fixing her hair. Finally she bent over and pulled on her ballet slippers. After a final inspection in front of a full length mirror she went out to the piano, satisfied that Mr Larry Brooks had been adequately prepared for.

Connie was, herself, a pianist of sorts. She sat down and let her fingers run lightly over the keyboard. For a few minutes she amused herself, trying to play by ear, one of Larry's ragtime tunes. She was thus engaged at three o'clock when the buzzer sounded at the door. Her heart was beating excitedly as she got up to answer it.

She swung the door open with a blinding smile. But the smile froze on her face and horror leaped into her eyes. There, wrapped in furs, stood the garish Mrs. Switzer. The matron's eyes looked her up and down with a smile, then she barged into the room before Connie could even recover herself.

"I see you're practicing, my dear. Please don't let me interrupt."

Connie closed the door. "I—I was just getting started."

"Then no doubt you've got to get on with it. And I shan't stay long. I was just so happy that I had to come by and congratulate you."

"What about?"

"Why—about the Ballet du Roi. You know of course, that we're beginning actually to make money. Philip sent me my first check just this morning. Believe me, it was a thrill to know that our efforts are paying off." Mrs. Switzer sat down and threw back her furs.

"Philip told me last night that we finally made a profit."

"It's only the beginning, my dear. Only the beginning. Believe me, with you in that show, we're all going places."

Connie thought instantly of a place she wished Mrs. Switzer would go, but quick. She didn't want the old battle-axe in her apartment when Larry arrived. Resentment at the woman's intrusion welled slowly within her.

"I must keep on rehearsing," she said, thinking rapidly of some way to get rid of her. "I hope to make the show even better."

"Of course. Go right ahead, my dear. I wouldn't interrupt for the world."

Connie stifled an impulse to order her out. But that would only cause complications. Mrs. Switzer was one of the pillars of the Ballet du Roi Association. Connie decided to use force only as a last desperate resort.

"I'm not accustomed to creating a choreography in front of an audience, Mrs. Switzer," she said, as diplomatically yet as firmly as possible.

The matron looked up quickly then burst into laughter. "Oh my. You artistic people amuse me so. You are all so temperamental. But I understand your problems and far be it from me to stop the wheels of progress. What are you working on, my dear?"

"Well, er," said Connie, searching frantically for something to say. "It's a sort of—well, a ragtime ballet idea."

"Splendid! Mind showing me how it goes?"

Connie could have killed her. Larry would be here any moment. But there was nothing to do but try and satisfy the woman. Connie felt utterly ridiculous as she improvised a few steps.

"Marvelous. Simply marvelous," Mrs. Switzer exclaimed.

"You've got the idea now," said Connie and it was all she could do to keep from adding "scram."

All at once it was too late. The buzzer sounded again. Connie glanced at Mrs. Switzer angrily then walked to the door. This time she was not disappointed. It was Larry Brooks. But the best she could do for him was a toothless smile.

"Hello," he greeted her, then his eyes went beyond her into the room and a queer expression crossed his face.

"You remember Mrs. Switzer, probably," Connie said. "She was here at the cocktail party yesterday."

"Yes. I remember. How are you, Mrs. Switzer?"

"Just fine, thank you, young man." The matron looked him over carefully. "Do you have something to do with the ballet?"

"He's going to work with me on the music," Connie explained hastily.

"Oh, I see."

"Play something for her, Larry. One of your ragtime numbers."

Larry glanced at Connie, not fully realizing the situation. For a brief instant his eyes were distracted by her bewitching appearance. He went to the piano and sat down. He played for a few moments as Connie watched Mrs. Switzer surreptitiously. Presently the matron was convinced that Larry's presence here was legitimate.

"It sounds grand," she said getting up. "I know the two of you have a lot of work to do. So I'll be trotting along."

Connie went to the door with her. In spite of the way she left, she managed to be decent to Mrs. Switzer until she left. When she closed the door she turned around to Larry and smiled with relief.

"I was afraid we might be stuck with her the rest of the afternoon."

"Who is she?" Larry asked.

"A wheel in the Ballet du Roi Association."

He looked at her and tried not to let his eyes roam over her as they wanted to. Suddenly he looked away. He wagged his head and smiled.

"Frankly, when you spoke to me about this last night, I didn't realize you were serious."

Connie walked over and leaned on the piano. She looked down at him. Before she could say anything Larry went on.

"I guess I owe you an apology, Miss Carter."

"What for?"

"I can see now that you really meant business. I hope I can produce what you expect of me."

"I'm sure you can."

Her eyes held his for a long moment. Suddenly, as if he were ashamed of his thoughts, he tore his eyes away.

"Shall we start in on it? You said something about ragtime and—"

"Yes, I guess we should." Connie knew she had to go along with the little scheme for awhile.

"Suppose you tell me what you had in mind."

"Something with good rhythm. Something lively. The sort of stuff you were playing last night. Why don't you just start in playing and I'll go through whatever steps come into my mind."

Larry nodded and began thumping the keys. A hitting melody

filled the room. Connie waited a moment, then caught the tempo and swung into an effortless dance. She caught glimpses of Larry from the corners of her eyes and knew he was looking at her. Connie began to feel better.

"Hey, I'm beginning to get the idea!" Larry cried five minutes later. He stopped playing abruptly and Connie looked around. "You want some original music, don't you? You want something to match a new dance?"

"Well, I guess that's what I had in mind," she said surprised.

"Golly, Miss Carter, this could turn into something big."

"Is that so?"

"It certainly could. A ragtime ballet. It's a swell idea," he said on a rising tide of excitement. "And I'm just the guy who can do some original rag music for you. Listen to this."

He played a few bars. Connie stood there watching him, only half listening to his music. He stopped and looked up at her.

"How did you like that?"

"Oh." She shifted to the other foot. "It sounded fine."

"Okay. Go ahead. See if you can work out some steps to it."

He started playing again. With a sigh she began dancing. This wasn't exactly her idea of a way to spend an afternoon with a young man whom she wanted to know better. His playing grew more compelling and Connie, in spite of herself, got more into the spirit of the thing. Here was an idea with possibilities. Properly handled they might have to have any number of rehearsals like this. But they had gone far enough for now.

"Look," she said, "there's no use knocking ourselves out."

He played on for a moment, his eyes staring excitedly but unseeing ahead of him, as his brain created melody and rhythm in unison. All at once he realized that Connie was standing beside him. He brought the music to an end with two final chords.

"No matter how hard we might try, we can't put a ballet together in one afternoon," she said.

He looked up at her and smiled. "You're right, I know. And I can see I've got quite a lot of work to do in compose a finished composition for you. What's the time limit on this thing?"

"No time limit in particular."

"I mean, were you planning on using it in a few weeks?"

"Maybe, if we can put something together."

"We can. I'm sure of it," he said, getting to his feet. All at once an expression of deep gratitude crossed his face. "Really, Miss Carter, I don't know how to thank you for such an opportunity."

"Quit calling me Miss Carter," she said with a trace of irritation. "Everyone calls me Connie."

"Then Connie it is," he grinned.

"Would you like a cocktail or do you insist on having beer?"

Larry laughed. "A cocktail would be fine."

Connie went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of Martinis and two glasses. Larry was seated on the divan in front of the cocktail table smoking a cigarette. She sat down and filled the glasses then handed him one. She took her own glass and sat back, pulling one knee up onto the divan.

"Here's luck to our new venture," Larry proposed.

"First give me a cigarette."

She didn't move an inch as he took out a pack. Larry was compelled to lean toward her to provide her with a cigarette and a light. As if to steady the lighter that he held she took his wrist in her hand. That inviting little ceremony attended to she smiled enchantingly and lifted her glass.

"To luck in our new venture."

As they drank she felt his eyes on her. She had been impressed by Larry Brooks the first moment she laid eyes on him. Now she was gratified to know that her opinion was unchanged. He wore well. A flutter of anticipation passed through her at the realization that she had him here besides her on the divan.

"This new ballet," he said, "whose idea was it?"

"Mine."

"No wonder you're such a success," he told her admiringly. "If we're able to execute what you've got in mind, it ought to be a knockout."

"How do you know for sure what I've got in mind?" She smiled at him from the corners of her eyes.

"From the sort of steps you did while dancing, I can almost visualize what the finished ballet should look like. An old time western saloon, maybe. Cowboys and prospectors and hostesses."

His words awakened a picture in Connie's mind and for a moment she considered it. Not bad. The possibilities were there, no doubt about that. But why did they have to go on thinking about that?

"How about another drink, Larry?" she asked.

This time it was Connie who leaned forward. Her elbow brushed his sleeve as she poured out two more cocktails. She gave him his refilled glass.

"You know something?" he asked as he took it.

"No. What?" Her eyes twinkled.

"I don't know what I was thinking of, but last night when you asked me to drop around this afternoon it just didn't occur to me that you were serious about ragtime music for a ballet."

"Now you know. How else do you think we get ideas for dances?"

Larry shook his head. "Frankly I had never stopped to consider it."

"Did you ever stop to think that you're a damn good piano player?"

"No, but I used to think a good deal about trying to be one," he laughed. The liquor was beginning to make his stomach feel warm and comfortable.

Connie drew both of her legs up onto the divan and twisted around so that she faced him. He found it very difficult to ignore the enticing curves of her hips and breasts. Finally he gave up and regarded her with forced casualness.

"Don't try to be a better one," she advised. "You're good enough the way you are." She emptied her glass and put it back on the table.

A magnetic excitement filled her at his nearness. His eyes were intent on her for a moment, then hastily he looked away. She sensed the doubt that had assailed his mind. He thought he was reading her incorrectly, but he wasn't.

"Tell me about yourself, Larry. Have you been playing long?"

"A few years," he replied thoughtfully.

"Did you ever try anything serious?"

"Yes. That was the trouble."

He looked at her with a wistful smile. Connie's eyes were tender as she gazed at him, knowing the struggle he had been through. She knew all about it.

"You might not know this," she said quietly, "but until six

months ago I was guarding the pavements all over New York. I've danced in some of the crumbiest joints in this city. It wasn't until I got into the Ballet du Rex that I started getting anywhere."

"Really?" He stared at her in amazement. "But—I thought you—Well, somehow I had the idea you were born a success."

"Not me," she said, shaking her dark head.

She saw the expression on his face relax a bit. He had learned something about her that he needed to know. And now, by golly, Connie decided, the rest was up to him.

"Still I pour us another drink?" he asked.

She nodded. This time, as he leaned over to hand her a drink, his face came close to hers. Connie didn't move. Their eyes met and without a word being spoken between them all questions were suddenly answered. The next instant his lips were on hers and at their touch a delicious shiver spiraled down Connie's spine. He withdrew and searched her face for a moment.

"Gee, Connie, I—"

He got no further. Quickly he set her drink back down on the table. His arms went around her and their lips met again. The contact had set off an explosion in both of them. He pressed her to him and her arms crept around his neck. Larry needed no more evidence.

His lips sought hers hungrily now. He kissed her eyes, her forehead, her cheeks and her neck. Connie drew in her breath sharply, holding him even closer to her.

"I never dreamed it could be this way," he murmured in her ear. "I thought you were something almost spirit-like . . . a sort of goddess of the dance."

She laughed softly.

"I'm very much a human being, Larry."

"You're gorgeous, damn."

It was not for Larry, though, to set her on a pedestal. She was solid and sweet reality in his arms. He explored her loveliness with his hands as his mind absorbed the prize that had befallen him. His astonishment at such good fortune soon gave way to mounting passion.

Connie clasped him to her, finding at last the release she had needed for so many, many months.

Connie had found herself a lover at last. Her job now was to make him her own.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"WHAT'S this I hear about you taking the evening off?"

That question was put to Larry at seven o'clock that evening as he sat on the edge of his sofa polishing a pair of black shoes. He glanced up at Jane Vedmar who had barged into his room without so much as a faint knock. He didn't mind. The only knocking Jane ever did was of a verbal nature. Even then it was limited to customers of O'Brien's saloon who were pugnacious when it came to tips.

"That's right. I'm going to see how the other half lives tonight."

"How come?" asked Jane, making herself as comfortable as she could on the worn, overstuffed chair with the broken spring. She was a handsome, Auburn-haired girl of medium height with a slender but graceful build.

"Have I asked questions about what you did during your night off?" he countered.

"You know I went to Staten Island last night to attend my cousin's wedding," Jane shot back.

"But you haven't told me what you did after the knot was tied."

"We all got soaked, including the groom. My cousin could have killed him," she laughed, thinking about it.

"He passed out, eh?"

"No, he just got drunk and bleary-eyed. Couldn't tell which girl he had married for awhile."

Larry looked at her and smiled. He and Jane had been close friends—quite close at times—for about a year. She was a waitress in O'Brien's saloon. Daffily he ran the brush across the leather of the toe, then held the shoe up and admired it.

"O'Brien told me we had a stunning party in last night," she said, after a moment.

"Most members of the party felt that way about it no doubt."

"How did you feel about it?"

Larry was giving his attention to his polishing job, but something in her tone caused him to stop and regard her. She was gazing across at him levelly. Their eyes met for a moment, then he shrugged.

"I didn't feel one way or the other. Do you think I should have?"

"Look, boss. You're not kidding me. O'Brien told me that one of these rich bitches was Connie Carter, the ballet dancer. And he also said that you knew her. Now, just what's this all about?"

"Oh yes," he said, brightening with mock surprise. "Connie Carter. We've been friends for years."

"I know better than that. Where'd you meet her?"

Larry knew by the look on Jane's face that any further kidding about it wouldn't set so well. He said blithely, "Behave it or not, I met her yesterday afternoon at a cocktail party."

"So then last night after the show, she hauls her gang down here to have a better look at you?" "Well," said Jane narrowly, "that adds up. But how does your taking tonight off fit in?"

"Elementary, my dear Watson," Larry replied, putting down the shoe beside the other one which was finished. He stood up, walked across the threadbare carpet and got a clean, white shirt out of the bureau drawer.

"If it's as elementary as I think, you're getting ready for a date," she said suspiciously.

He turned and wagged his head sorrowfully. "All I've got is an Anna Oakley to a performance of the Ballet de Bol tonight. If I had two I'd take you along."

"No, thank you."

"Wouldn't you like to see Miss Carter do that *Edreda* number? They say it's the hottest thing since the Chicago fire."

"Not if I had to go on a free ticket that tomato handed out," Jane replied wittily.

He gave her an amused glance. "What's she done to you?"

"Nothing. But something tells me she didn't come around to O'Brien's last night just for the food and liquor. Something else attracted her."

"I can't imagine what," said Larry, keeping a straight face.



as he put on the shirt. He buttoned it, then sat back down on the sofa and bent over to put on his shoes.

When he finished lacing them and tying two neat bow knots he raised up. Jane had gotten up from the chair and was standing before him. Impulsively he circled her with his arms and pulled her to him. She rested her hands on his shoulders.

"Listen to me, you big lug, we've been friends for a long time," she said. "But if you start running around with the four hundred and getting big ideas, don't count on any more favors from me. Understand?"

"You've got me all wrong. All I'm going to do tonight is see the ballet." He looked up at her truthfully.

"Sure, sure. A cocktail party. A visit to O'Brien's. Then an invitation to watch her dance. If that doesn't look like the beginning of something, I'll put it with you."

Larry wondered what Jane would think if she knew what had happened already. Probably wouldn't believe it. He hardly could himself. Fondly he drew her head down to him and kissed her full lips. Jane was a swell girl. He had even thought of some day asking her to marry him.

"I haven't got any grandiose ideas. When all's said and done you're my speed."

"Well I like that!"

She shoved him down on the sofa and pounced upon him, holding him by his hair. Larry laughed. She fastened her grip on him even harder.

"Take that back!" she ordered. "You hear me? Take that back!"

Larry was so choked with mirth that he couldn't reply. She rubbed his head with her knuckles.

"Ow!" he exclaimed.

"Do you take it back?"

He grinned up at her. I'll take it back."

She kissed him passionately. Then all of a sudden she jumped up, her eyes bright with victory. Larry sat up and reached for her, but she was already headed for the door.

"Hey, come back here," he cried.

"I was supposed to be on duty downstairs ten minutes ago. See you later in the evening, dreamboat."

The door closed quickly behind her. Larry sat there for a

moment smiling. Then he glanced at his wrist watch and was galvanized into action.

Ten minutes later Larry left the room, neatly attired in a double-breasted blue suit, a gray felt hat and a smart covert topcoat. He was no longer a ragtime piano player in O'Brien's Third Avenue saloon. He was a handsome, self-assured young man about town, off to the ballet and an evening of high class entertainment.

Larry occupied a choice box seat in the theater. For two hours and a half he sat there, entranced with the tones and colors and motion served up to his appreciative senses. He thoroughly enjoyed each number, but when Connie was on stage he was transported out of this world.

It seemed incredible that he had held the girl in his arms that very afternoon. Here, in this fantasia of wearing movement and wood-winds, she was an elusive enchantress. She was an illusion of great and ethereal beauty, dancing with such elasticity and lovely grace that her very existence in the mundane world seemed hardly possible.

"Gosh, but she's marvelous!" he exclaimed aloud in the midst of the *Libretto* scene.

A gentleman who had come in later and taken the seat next to Larry, turned and peered at him through his shell-rimmed glasses. "I beg your pardon?"

Larry gave a start. Until he heard those words he had hardly been aware that he had spoken out. He looked around apologetically and instantly recognized one of the men who had come with Connie to O'Brien's saloon last night.

"Oh, hello," he said pleasantly.

Philip looked at him blankly for a moment, then remembered, or thought he did. But surely this fellow couldn't be that same saloon musician he had met last night. Or could it?

"Weren't you the piano player?"

"That's right," Larry smiled. "Last night, in O'Brien's."

"I remember," said Philip, peered at the young man's presence here. Then he returned his eyes to the stage and to Connie and looked as if he wished he could forget it.

When the final curtain fell and the performers had taken their bows, Larry stood up. The house lights were on now and the man in the shell-rimmed glasses was already moving away toward the exit from the box. Larry called to him.

"I've forgotten your name, sir. Mine's Larry Brooks. We were honored to have you and the others in O'Brien's last night."

Philip's eyes darted around fearfully, as if others nearby might have heard where he had been. He looked at Larry and forced a civil smile.

"It was an experience, at any rate," he said, moving on.

"You're a friend of Miss Carter's, aren't you?" Larry asked, following him.

"Yes."

"I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I enjoyed her performance so much this evening that I'd like awfully to drop around to her dressing room and pay my respects just for a moment."

Philip stopped. He looked around at Larry peculiarly. After a moment, he said, "Look, old man, I'm afraid that's a bit irregular. Miss Carter sees no one in her dressing room."

With that he turned away brusquely. Two more steps took both men through the entrance to the box. An usher was standing there requiring of those who left it if one of them was named Brooks.

"That's me," said Larry, giving the usher a bewildered look.

"Miss Carter asked if you could come by her dressing room. Follow me, please." With that the usher started off.

Larry glanced smilingly at Philip who was staring back at him with wide-eyed astonishment. The next second he took out after the usher. Philip trotted with sudden determination at his heels. They arrived in a dead heat backstage at Connie's dressing room. The usher knocked and announced Mr. Larry Brooks.

"Come in," Connie called gaily beyond the door.

Larry turned the knob and entered, followed by Philip one step behind him. Connie looked up at them both. She smiled.

"Glad to see you two remembered each other from last night. I forgot to tell you, Philip, that I had given Larry a ticket to the box for tonight. Sit down."

"I wish you had told me," said Philip. "Naturally I would have arranged to bring him back here after the show so he could extend his thanks personally."

"No harm done. I remembered to send an usher. How'd you enjoy the performance, Larry?" Connie was in splendid spirits.

"I've never seen anything quite like it before," he said in a most flattering tone.

"It was an unusually good show tonight," said Philip, not to be outdone. And Larry wondered how he knew that since he hadn't been there until toward the last.

"Glad you both enjoyed it," said Connie airily. "Now if you'd both wait for me in the foyer I'll get dressed in a jiffy and we'll be on our way."

"You mean he's going with us to eat?" asked Philip, jerking his thumb toward Larry and frowning.

"Yep. We've got business to talk over tonight."

Larry and Philip went out. They walked in silence out to the entrance of the theater. Larry lit a cigarette. He glanced with some amusement at the perplexed features of the older man. Then he looked away and let his mind savor the recollections of what he had witnessed on the stage.

"What sort of business was Constance referring to?" asked Philip, no longer able to contain his curiosity.

"You've got me there," Larry replied lightly.

"Just where do you know her from?"

"From the cocktail party she gave yesterday afternoon."

Philip eyed him evenly. "What were you doing there?"

"I guess I was sort of an interloper. A friend of mine, a fellow I've known for years, was invited and asked me to come along."

"Who was it?" Philip asked sternly.

"Clayton. He's one of the dancers in the show."

Philip nodded and made a mental note to have a little chat with Clayton. After all, if just anybody could crash the parties Connie threw with Philip's money, something obviously had to be done. No male dancer was going to take it upon himself to do a trick like that again! Not if he valued his job in the Ballet de la Ron! Philip would see to that!

Half an hour later they were joined by Connie. She gazed at them both fondly, thrust her arms through theirs and marched them gaily out to Philip's waiting limousine, fairly crackling with vitality.

"I'm as hungry as a bear tonight," she said, sinking back into the seat.

"We'll go to a first-class restaurant for a change," Philip remarked dryly. He gave orders to his chauffeur.

Twenty minutes later in the refined environment of a high class supper club Connie turned her charm on Philip.

"I'm sure you've been wondering what I'd had up my sleeve with Larry. Well, it's this. He's going to write an original score for a new ballet. A ragtime type of thing. If I can perfect the choreography I have in mind for it, we'll have something really new and novel for the show."

After her words sunk in, Philip was able to smile. He had been fearful of a rival in Larry Brooks. And in that connection some suspicion still lurked in his mind. But it was a relief to know that Connie had been thinking of business.

"Why didn't you tell me this before, my dear?" he asked.

"I wasn't sure that it had any possibilities or that it could be worked out until I listened to Larry's playing last night."

"There's still a good chance it won't unless I can write some good music," Larry pointed out.

They discussed the matter all through the meal. When they finished Connie was tired and requested that they take her home. When Philip's limousine stopped in front of her apartment she insisted that they go on.

"Be a dear, Philip, as I know you will, and run Larry home."

"As you wish, Connie."

The two men bid her good night. As they drove away Philip asked Larry where he lived.

"Over O'Brien's saloon."

Philip smiled but he gave the necessary instructions to his chauffeur. A long silence followed as the car made its way to Larry's address. Just before they arrived, Larry turned to his host and thanked him for the supper and the lift home.

"Quite all right," said Philip without enthusiasm. Then he added thoughtfully, "When I arranged to take Connie out after the show tonight, I certainly had no idea I'd end up with you."

## CHAPTER FIVE

CONNIE and Larry sat in a restaurant that had been named in honor of the lavish Louis XIV of France. His Royal Highness would have been highly pleased with its swank interior and royally entertained by the scene glimpsed through its broad expanse of window. For, on this cold but sunny afternoon, unusually good patronage was being enjoyed by Mr. Rockefeller's ice skating rink.

A couple of hundred persons, along with golden Prometheus, were gathered about watching the skaters. Several young lady skaters were being especially watched, not because they were particularly proficient with their blades, but because their charms were generously revealed by their brief skating costumes.

Ordinarily Larry Brooks would have been entranced with such a scene, but not with Connie Carter sitting across the table from him. It took charm of superior sort to distract from the glittering Connie. He was content to keep his eyes on her.

As for Connie, no man existed for her, even inside the restaurant, except the ragtime piano player from O'Brien's saloon. Her huge dark eyes regarded him with infinite tenderness, silently communicating to him the love and devotion that filled her heart.

"I think you're marvelous," she said.

This statement wasn't quite as forthright as it may have sounded, for she was referring to Larry's completion in ten days time of the music for the ballet.

"I just kept plugging away until it was finished," said Larry modestly.

"Nevertheless, I think it's wonderful that you could do it in ten days. When am I going to get to hear it?"

"You've heard snatches of it off and on."

"And I've loved every bit of it."

"What I did here—" Larry gave a loving pat to a large manila envelope that lay at one side on the table—"was put it all together. It's all down in black and white, ready for the arranger."

"You're a genius," Connie announced, staring across at him admiringly.

"No, I'm afraid not," Larry smiled and shook his head.

"Could you play it for me all the way through this afternoon?"

"Maybe." He gave her another kind of smile. "But you'll have to promise not to put on that outfit you've been wearing the other times I've been up to your apartment. Not if you want me to keep my mind on the music."

"I'll dress up like a witch and not say a word," she laughed.

"No matter how you disguised yourself you'd still be beautiful."

Connie sighed and her heart was in her eyes as she gazed at Larry. He said the nicest things, had the nicest way about him. But Connie had discovered, during the times they had been together for the past two weeks, that Larry refused to believe in the affair they were having.

"We live in two different worlds, Connie," he had told her one time as he held her in his arms. "And I don't see how we could ever be closer than this."

Ever since, her agile mind had been working on ways to correct the situation. If she didn't see fit to step down to his strata in life, what happier solution than to raise him to hers?

"Well, anyway," she said, after taking a sip of coffee, "I want to hear that music this afternoon. If it's as good as I think it is, I've got a swell idea in mind."

"What's that?" Larry asked.

"First of all, we'll get the arrangement made and have several copies run off. I'll write in the ideas I've got for making it into a ballet, then turn it over to the ballet's choreographer so he can whip it into shape and get us into rehearsals on it."

"My gosh! All that, right away?" he said in amazement.

"Wait a minute. I'm not finished. Meanwhile, we'll have to start giving it some build up. What we'll do is rent a hall and you can present it in a rental. We'll invite the music critics and—"

"Hey," Larry interrupted in alarm, "that costs dough!"

Connie smiled sweetly. "You just leave that end of it to me."

An expression of grave doubt crossed Larry's face. He studied her closely for a few moments. He didn't intend to have her or any other girl paying his bills.

"That won't do, Connie," he said with great determination. "I'm not the sort of guy who lets a woman pay the freight."

"But I won't be paying anything," she explained at once. "We'll let the Ballet de Rod Association pick up the check."

In other words, Philip Hathaway. But she didn't tell Larry that. He continued to look at her, not at all convinced that she knew what she was talking about.

"Why would the Association, wherever they are, sponsor a rental for me? I'm nothing but a henky-tonk piano player."

"You're a composer. And a great one at that. It would be a privilege for the Association to present you to the world."

Larry wagged his head as an incredulous smile crossed his face. He had never known a girl quite so creative as Connie. She knew more angles than a Harvard geometrician cramming for final exams. But he still didn't see how it could possibly work out. Even if it did—what then?

"I don't get it, Connie," he admitted hopelessly.

"Trust me, won't you, please?" she begged.

"I will on one condition," he said after thinking it over. "Before you commit yourself or anyone else, promise you'll take the matter up with me."

"It's a promise," she came right back, with a brilliant smile.

Half an hour later they arrived at Connie's apartment in a taxi. Upstairs they removed their coats and Larry went to the piano with the manila envelope. He took out the manuscript and arranged it on the music rack. Connie, as she had promised, curled up sedately on the divan.

"Ready?" he asked, glancing at her over his shoulder.

"Go ahead, buster. Let 'er roll."

The next instant Larry's music filled the air. To Connie's trained ear it was first rate stuff. She was prepared to believe in his work, no matter what. But this was good. It was, she decided as the music continued, very good. Larry had something. He had something people would pay for.

He played for nearly thirty minutes and during that time Connie forgot herself completely. A myriad of dance steps occurred to her as she went along with the rhythm. A ballet to that music would be a sensation! Even the great Scott Joplin would have readily approved Larry's ragtime tunes.

"Well, that's it," said Larry when he had finished.

He turned on the piano bench to see what Connie thought of it. His eyes sought hers hopefully as would any artist's seeking

approbation of some new work. She stared back at him with shining eyes.

"Darling, it's out of this world!" she exclaimed.

Suddenly she jumped up and ran over to him. In her excitement and eagerness to embrace him she almost knocked him off the piano bench. She glided her lips to his. Surely no one in this world had such a desirable lover as she. She ran her fingers luxuriously through his thick hair.

"Did—did you really like it?" he asked, while attempting to get his breath.

"Like it? I can't tell you how wonderful I think it is!"

He smiled. For a moment he looked down at her. And he knew all at once that he was in love with this bewitching girl. He knew, also, that he could not afford to be.

Connie sought his lips again. He bent over and kissed her, holding her ever more tightly. She gasped for breath, yet struggled to get even closer to him, if such a thing were possible.

"Oh darling, darling—" she breathed.

Much as he loved her, then, his mind considered the fateful passion that was engulfing them both. How could such a thing as this go on without inflicting grievous wounds? With all of Connie's plans working out, she would still be the great premiere danseuse of the Ballet du Roi, and he—?

The telephone tinkled.

"Let it ring," said Larry.

"I'd better answer it," she apologized. "It might be Philip, and it's important that I see him tonight."

Larry put her down on her feet. The spell was suddenly broken. He watched Connie as she walked over and picked up the receiver. How practical and matter-of-fact she became all at once! He sat down and gazed at her in bewilderment.

"Yes!" she said.

"Connie, this is Philip," came his voice in miniature over the wire. "Shall I pick you up for a bite of food before show time?"

"No, Philip. I'll go directly to the theater from here tonight. But I do wish you'd meet me afterward. I've something terribly important to take up with you."

"Really, my dear?" he cried, delighted. "I'll most certainly meet you in that event."

"Good. And thanks so much, Philip." She hung up, then turned and smiled at Larry. "Terrible! I'm going to make preliminary arrangements for your rental."

"Just who is this Philip Hathaway? And what's he got to do with you?"

"He's president of the Ballet du Roi Association."

"But isn't there something, er, more than that between you?"

He looked at her askance.

"Nothing that matters, sweetheart," said Connie lightly. She joined him.

She pulled him down to her. Folding her arms about his neck she closed her eyes and offered her lips. Expectantly she waited for his kiss. When it failed to come she opened her eyes. Larry was staring down at her peculiarly. Her brows went up questioningly.

"I don't understand you at times, Connie," he murmured. "Sometimes I even wonder how much all this means to you."

"How can you doubt that?" she asked, hurt. "Oh, Larry, surely you can't."

"Yes—"

Connie stopped his words with her lips. The fire in her kies sent Larry reeling again.

"Oh, I love you, my sweet," Connie whispered in his ear.

She meant it; meant it more sincerely than anything else in her life.

It was late when Larry left. Yvonne had even returned from her seventh afternoon off in the past ten days. She helped Connie get ready for the theater.

"Mademoiselle is very happy these days," Yvonne observed pleasantly as Connie hummed a ragtime tune.

"The happiest I've ever been, Yvonne. Don't you think Larry is handsome?" She breathed deeply and let out a love-lorn sigh.

"He is. He is a most attractive young man. But, mademoiselle—?"

"Yes?" Connie smiled at the little maid.

"What are you going to do about Mr. Hathaway?"

Connie thought that over a moment. "A good question, Yvonne. I haven't quite made up my mind yet. Philip has been kind and I shall always be grateful. I hope to find someone for him. Someone who will make him happy."

"It may be the kinder thing to—" Yvonne paused and

searched her Galle mind for the proper English idiom—"to give him the ax. A clean, swift blow is often the most merciful."

"You're right," Connie agreed.

But it wasn't as simple as that. She couldn't afford to give Philip up quite so readily. She had to retain his good will at least until she had gotten what she wanted for Larry. Philip was slated—though she hadn't let him in on it yet—to play an important part in that undertaking.

Yvonne smoothed Connie's dress for her, then hurried out of the bedroom to get her mink coat. Connie followed later. As she slipped into the coat she informed the maid that she might be a bit late tonight.

"I've got some business to take up with Philip," she explained. "Then mademoiselle wouldn't mind too much if my Gene comes by for a while tonight?"

The two girls exchanged knowing smiles. Connie didn't mind at all.

With that she hurried off to the theater.

## CHAPTER SIX

AT that precise moment, in a hotel suite eleven blocks away in another part of town, Robbin Walker was pacing the floor. Ginger Doss sat in a chair watching him with a belligerent look in her eyes. A bottle of whiskey and two half empty glasses sat on a small table nearby.

"Three weeks," said Robbin in disgust. "and a thousand bucks down the drain. I'm not going on indefinitely. I warn you!"

"You listen to me!" Ginger shot back. "When you hired me for the job you said that Hathaway would be a push-over. You said his main weakness was women. Okay, you were right. But his weakness in that line is all for that hood!"

Robbin gave her a disgusted look. "That's why I hired you. Connie Carter is taking him for all he's worth. She's not interested in influencing Hathaway so that I can get in on his firm's expansion contacts. She's only interested in getting all the money she can out of him for that damned ballet. Your job was to muscle in on her but you haven't got to first base!"

"How could I?" Ginger demanded. "She had her hooks into him before I ever met the sap."

"I thought you were a better operator than that," he said contemptuously.

"Oh, you did, eh? Well get this, mastermind. You can't win a race if it's been run before you even show up."

"You've had several cracks at him, but what happened?"

"Each time I was just filling in until he had to meet that Carter dame."

"You didn't make any time with him. That's what happened?"

Robbin glared at the girl.

"Get somebody else then. That's your privilege."

Walker continued to pace the floor. "It's too late for that now. If I don't get some action soon it'll be too late to influence his decision on those contracts."

"Suggest something, then. A new approach. I've tried everything I know," Ginger challenged.

"The least you could do would be to keep after him."

"That's a brilliant remark," she said sarcastically. "Do you go for a girl who pesters hell out of you?"

"No, but I'm not Hathaway."

"You're nuts, that's what you are."

"Have you called him up lately?" He eyed her for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I didn't think so."

"Okay, Wise guy!" she shot back. "I'll call him up. Might as well queer what little chance I might have, once and for all."

Angrily she went to the telephone and in a couple of minutes, somewhat to her surprise, heard Philip's voice on the other end. Quickly she composed herself and spoke sweetly.

"Philip, I hardly dreamed I'd find you home at this hour. I just took a chance and—"

"I was almost out the door," said Philip, always pleased to hear from a girl and especially an attractive one like Ginger.

"Well, I guess you're busy. I was just going out to dinner myself and thought that—well, maybe, you weren't eating with anybody yourself."

"As a matter of fact I'm not, Ginger. I haven't anything to do until after the show tonight. It would be a pleasure to have you join me," said Philip companionably.

"I'd love to. Where shall I meet you?"

"How about Teeto Shura's?"

"Splendid. See you there in twenty minutes."

Ginger hung up with a pensive expression on her face. Walker looked at her with I-told-you-soes written all over his features. She recovered from her surprise and regarded her employer.

"That was too easy," said Ginger. "It can't mean anything more than a dinner."

"You'll be with him. Now this time don't be so coy. Give him the full treatment. Make him forget Connie Carter."

"He's meeting her after the show tonight."

"You make me ask," Walker announced loudly. "Haven't you ever made a guy forget he had a date with another girl?"

"Sure, but—"

"Then go to work on Hathaway. Get him all steamed up about you. Get him drunk. Get him good and drunk if you have to. In any event, don't let him keep that late date, not if you want to stay on my payroll."

Ginger glanced at him with silent disdain. She hadn't too much regard for Robin Walker to begin with. Any man who would use a woman to help him get business couldn't be a very dependable person. Not as long as he paid her, Ginger didn't much care. Deftly she applied lipstick and in a moment was ready to go.

"I'll expect a full report from you tomorrow," he said.

"You'll get it," said Ginger and went out.

She was in no mood to high pressure Philip into anything tonight. And when she met him twenty minutes later she was friendly but a shade reserved. Philip was delighted to have her company for dinner and proved it right off by ordering a bottle of champagne.

"I'm flattered that you thought of calling me," he said smiling.

She gave him a pleasant smile in return. "It was forward of me I know, Philip. And I do hope you'll forgive me."

"Of course, Ginger. I didn't think it forward of you at all. On the contrary, it was very thoughtful of you to have me in mind." He filled his glass and drank to her health. "I'm only sorry that I have another engagement later."

"With Connie?" she asked.

He nodded.

"She's a cute girl and I don't blame you, Philip," Ginger replied.

He looked at her with surprise. The girl he knew wasn't accustomed to making charitable remarks about each other. Such an attitude was a welcome relief.

"That's awfully decent of you to say that," Philip observed and his opinion of Ginger took a decided upward trend.

"But it's true."

"Sure it is. Connie is wonderful. In many respects she approaches an ideal."

Ginger wouldn't go quite that far in her evaluation of the dancer but she discreetly kept her thoughts to herself. She gave Philip a fetching smile and raised her glass.

"Lots of luck to you, Philip. You deserve the very best."

Finding herself with a sympathetic listener for the first time in so long that he couldn't remember any others, Philip was moved to let himself talk. He discussed Connie, the ballet, the Hathaway Look and Bolt Company and a horse. By the time he got to the horse he was getting rather loquacious, having nearly emptied the bottle that rested in the ice bucket beside the table.

The horse, Ginger discovered, was one he owned on a farm of his upstate. She listened to him with friendly curiosity and the growing realization that Philip might—just barely might—be playing right into her hands.

"I didn't know you rode," she said, her eyes admiring him. "One thing about you, Philip, never ceases to amaze me. Every time I've been with you, I've learned something new and interesting about you."

She encouraged him to tell more about himself. Philip found this easy to do. He ordered another bottle of champagne for them to drink as their dinner was served. And with Ginger paving the way he went right on drinking and talking as they ate.

"I'd like a liqueur," she said when they were finished. "Will you join me?" she asked invitingly.

Philip announced emphatically that he would. He was in an expansive mood by this time and was thoroughly enjoying himself for a change. They had not one, but several.

All at once Ginger realized that victory was within her grasp. She inveigled him into drinking more and more and by the time they left Toot Shor's Philip was in his cups.

"Gotta meet Connie," he mumbled drunkenly when she got him into a cab at midnight.

"Don't worry, Philip. There's plenty of time," she said easily. "Let's stop in and have another drink at the Astor bar on the way."

"S'marvelous suggestion," he grinned stupidly as she snuggled beside him in the seat, and with that remark he relinquished all control over the evening.

Mental telepathy may or may not have had anything to do with the idea that struck Connie at that moment. She had been waiting impatiently in the darkened foyer of the theater for the past thirty minutes. Waiting for anyone was something Connie had not done for a long time. She glanced at her diamond wrist watch for the sixth time and saw that it was now twelve o'clock.

A storm had been brewing inside her for twenty minutes. If she hadn't wanted especially to be with Philip tonight for a very important reason she wouldn't have waited five minutes for him. The very idea of him standing her up! And he hadn't even sent word as to why—!

If it hadn't been for her hunger she would have tracked Philip down right then and read the riot act to him. As it was her stomach demanded food. She pulled her coat about her and stepped out onto the windswept sidewalk. Immediately she was confronted with another problem. Where should the premiere dancers of the Ballet du Roi go to partake of a lovely supper?

She was reminded of her early days in New York as she crossed Times Square without an escort at her elbow. But in those days her destination would have been a drug store counter or a hamburger shop instead of Lindy's. With her chin high and defiance gleaming in her eyes she went into the restaurant and asked for a table for one.

As she waited for her lobster Connie brooded over a highball. Her initial anger at Philip temporarily gave way to the belief that something dire had befallen him. She considered the possibility then, cast it aside. Barkins, his valet, would have

contacted her at the theater. In her wildest imagination she could figure no logical reason why Philip had stood her up. It wasn't like him. Not at all. It was also fond and unforgivable.

She'd make him pay for that!

Grimly she attacked her lobster. Thirty minutes later, having satiated her appetite, she drank some coffee with brandy while she pondered her next step. The first thing to do was call Barkins and get a line on where Philip might be.

"Howdy, Connie."

She gave a start and looked up. Jack Clayton and one of the ballerinas from the show were standing beside her table. She motioned for them to sit down.

"It isn't very often we find you alone these day, Connie," Jack smiled as he and the ballerina, whose name was June, sat down at her table.

"It sure isn't, Connie," June added.

There was nothing upstage about Connie Carter. These two folks were fellow entertainers, even though she was the star of the show. She gave them a wry smile.

"I'm not alone out of choice, believe me," she told them. "My date still hadn't turned up by midnight and I had to have something to eat. But just wait until I get my hands on the skunk!"

"Who was it, Hathaway?" Jack asked.

"Yes."

He and June exchanged glances. Connie saw something significant was passing between them and her eyes narrowed.

"Do you know where he is?" she asked.

"June and I just came from the Astor Bar. We were there having a couple of quick ones with an out-of-town friend of mine. Maybe I shouldn't tell you the rest of it, Connie." Jack gave her a speculative glance.

"The devil you shouldn't. Come on, give! Was Philip there?"

"Yes, he was. And both Jack and I remarked about it," June spoke up. "He was there with some blonde."

"He was?" Connie exclaimed, her eyes wide.

"Maybe you shouldn't come to any conclusions right off," Jack advised. "It looked to me as if the blonde had led him astray."

"You mean—" Connie stared at them open mouthed.



Jack nodded. "He was tighter than a heat owl. He looked right at me as we passed his table but didn't know me from Adam."

Connie sat flabbergasted. She gazed off into space, her mind grappling with this startling turn of events. That wasn't like Philip at all. As long as she had known him she had never seen him that drunk!

"Beats anything I ever heard of," she said and managed a smile for the benefit of her two companions.

She didn't want them to see the havoc that swirled suddenly within her. With grim determination she held her growing rage in abeyance until she had finished her cigarette. Casually she beckoned to the waiter and paid her check. She bid June and Jack good night and left the restaurant.

But the moment she was outside, her anger boiled to the surface. With quick purposeful strides she lit off down the street in the direction of the Astor. Her lips were compressed in a thin line and her eyes gleamed maliciously. Drastic measures were called for at a time like that.

A search of the Astor Bar, however, failed to reveal any trace of Philip Hathaway and a blonde. This stopped her, but only for a moment. She started to telephone to contact Burkens but on second thought swerved off toward the entrance of the hotel.

Connie got into a taxi and gave the driver Philip's address. Like a vengeful Danna her determination mounted with the increased tempo of the chase. She'd make quick work of the blonde, then attend to the hapless Philip. A few minutes later she arrived at his apartment.

"Where is he?" she demanded, sweeping past Burkens and into the room.

The valet, a tall impeccably dressed middle aged man, looked at her in surprise and confusion. Concern filled his eyes as they darted toward the bedroom.

"Er, Mr. Hathaway, isn't—"

"Never mind!" Connie exclaimed, reading his thoughts.

She made a beeline for the bedroom. An instant later she burst in. Philip was half undressed and slumped in a chair near the bed. Ginger stood beside him trying to revive him with a wet towel.

"So, you were the one," said Connie glaring at Ginger.

Ginger measured her cautiously. "I managed to get him home, is that's what you mean."

"What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything," Ginger replied, her eyes wary. "He got bloated on his own."

"Maybe this will teach you to mind your own business."

Connie swung. The palm of her hand smacked viciously against Ginger's cheek. Ginger stepped back. She barely had time to realize what had happened before Connie slapped her again. This time Ginger cried out in defiance but Connie had the aggressor's advantage. They clashed. Though Ginger was the heavier of the two by at least fifteen pounds she was thrown backwards.

Connie landed on top as they hit the floor, knocking the breath out of Ginger. She was about to administer further punishment to her vanquished rival when Burkens ran in horrified and pulled Connie off.

"Miss Carter, please!" he cried in alarm.

Connie's rage reached a stage bordering on frenzy at that moment. She turned the air blue reciting what she thought of Ginger but Burkens was the only one who heard. Ginger sat up dizzily, shaking her head as if to clear it. Through it all Philip remained slumped oblivious in the chair.

"Please, please," Burkens begged. "You must calm down, Miss Carter."

Connie wrenched herself free of his grasp. For an instant it looked as if she might renew her attack on Ginger. But just then Philip groaned and shifted in the chair. His glasses had slipped down on his nose and his mouth hung partly open. Connie favored him with a look of supreme loathing.

"The drunken act," she said, speaking her thoughts aloud. "Why am I wasting time here?"

With that she turned suddenly and marched out of the room, through the living room to the door. She slammed it behind her. Connie was angry and disgusted with herself all at once. Why had she wasted time coming here? Why? Her original purpose disappeared completely as she thought of Larry. He wouldn't have gotten drunk and left her wailing at the theater.

She hailed a taxi on the street and told the driver to take her

to O'Brien's. She should have gone there in the first place. Now that she had delivered herself of her rage, she was chagrined that she should have given into it so completely. What the hell difference did it make to her if Philip got drunk with Ginger? Does? Neither of them were worth the least consideration. Neither meant a thing to her.

By the time she reached the saloon her anticipation at being with Larry the remainder of the evening had completely overcome her anger at Philip and Ginger. She paid the driver and got out. In the saloon she learned from the bartender that Larry had knocked off for the evening about half an hour ago and had gone upstairs to his room.

Following the bartender's directions, Connie made her way up a dimly lighted stairway. On the third floor she found Larry's door. Connie stood there for a moment smiling mischievously to herself. What a happy surprise this visit would be to Larry.

She knocked. There was a moment of startled silence from within. Then she heard his bare feet padding to the door. A second later it opened a few inches and Larry peered out at her. His eyes bulged.

"Surprise!" Connie cried, pushing against the door and flinging her arms about him.

For a brief second Connie felt the thrill of him against her. Then her own eyes opened wide as a girl sat up suddenly on the davenport. Connie recognized her as one of the waitresses she had seen not so long ago in O'Brien's saloon. Suddenly Connie was paralyzed both in body and mind.

Not one of them moved for at least twenty seconds. Connie stared and stared as her mind wrestled with the full impact of what she saw. Jane Volmer sat there, not moving an inch. Larry stood there fascinated by the horror of what had happened.

Connie felt her head turning and her eyes were almost glazed as she looked up at him. Her body felt numb. She turned around all at once and staggered toward the stairs. There was no feeling at all in her legs and she wondered dully what

enabled her to keep going. She still saw Larry's dismayed face before her as she stumbled down the stairs.

"Oh, no!" Those two words that escaped her were barely a gasp.

She never did know how she got down the two flights. Dazedly she found herself on the sidewalk. Miraculously a taxi drew up and she got in. The driver inquired twice before she remembered to mumble her address. She rode all the way home as if in a trance.

It wasn't until she was in the elevator going up that her lips began to quiver. Her eyes blurred as grief began welling within her. With superhuman effort she managed to hold back her anguish until she reached her door.

"Mademoiselle!" Yvonne exclaimed in great distress when she opened the door.

Connie walked past her into the room. She didn't even notice that Yvonne was embarrassed. Only dully did she realize that Gene hastily arose from the divan and gaped at her in deep agitation and embarrassment.

Suddenly Connie was blinded by tears. She ran wildly to her bedroom, closed the door and locked it. Her coat dropped to the floor. Her grief broke like a storm as she flung herself on the bed. She beat the covers with her fists as she poured out her anguish. Her whole body was racked with the torture of her sobbing. Her mouth was twisted in agony as she buried her head into her pillow, attempting to shut out forever the tragedy of this night.

It was fully thirty minutes before her grief began to subside. Flooding thoughts crossed her mind as she was caught in a maelstrom of loneliness. Everywhere she had turned tonight had been evidence of treachery in love. She had been scorned, denied and, as if in final mockery, a cruel fate had permitted her a glimpse of tenderness in her own apartment—a love that she could only look upon with envy and despair.

Connie's sobs broke out again but this time for only a short duration. Her emotions had been wrung dry. She was dulled by an overwhelming exhaustion. A few moments later she drifted off into a deep but tormented slumber.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THE world that Connie awakened to was a cheerless place, even to a scudding overcast sky. She opened her eyes. Her tears of the night before had dried on her lids, making them heavy and uncomfortable. A great weariness had descended on her aching body. For the first few seconds of her return to consciousness her mind struggled to comprehend what was the matter with her.

The next instant reality returned with a rush. The pain of it distorted her features and her anguished eyes stared up into space as if peering into desondrity itself. Her thoughts probed for some means of escape but found none. Further sleep was impossible, though it was not even ten o'clock.

Connie arose and dropped her tired legs over the side of the bed. She took a deep, halting breath. When she exhaled, it was a long, heartbroken sigh. She stood up and plodded dismally to the bathroom, where she stood under a cold shower for seven painful minutes.

The shower helped but little to alleviate her physical suffering. It did nothing at all to relieve her tortured mind. After drying herself she got into a warm, quilted robe and went to the kitchen. As she was making herself some coffee Yvonne appeared.

"Mademoiselle, what is it?" she asked, searching Connie's face worriedly.

"I—I just thought some black coffee might do me some good." Connie replied, not looking at the girl.

"Sit down. Please do. I'll fix it for you."

Connie sank onto one of the cushions in the breakfast nook and Yvonne took over. A few minutes later the maid poured her a cup of steaming black coffee. She stood there for a moment looking down at Connie.

"Do not think me forward, mademoiselle, but I should like to drink some coffee with you, if I may. I'm so ashamed—so terribly ashamed of myself and Gene last night."

"Sure. Pour yourself a cup and sit down," said Connie indifferently.

Yvonne joined her and gazed across at her mistress covertly. "When you hadn't come home by three I remembered what you said last night and permitted Gene to stay. Gooee," the little maid shuddered, "I was so terribly embarrassed, and that stupid Gene was so startled that he did nothing but stare at you."

"Don't worry. Forget it. It was all my fault."

Connie's frustration of last night leaped into her mind. Once again emotion threatened to choke her. She brushed aside a tear and fought for control.

"You're not feeling well," Yvonne observed anxiously.

"I'm all right."

"But I knew the moment I saw you last night that something had gone wrong."

"I'll say it did!" Connie replied, showing a spark of life for the first time since awakening.

Yvonne waited for her to go on. She never pried into her employer's affairs and when Connie didn't say anything she discreetly sipped her coffee.

"I'm sorry, mademoiselle."

Still Connie didn't speak. She sat there, brooding over her coffee with her eyes lowered to the table, as she considered the injustice that had befallen her last night. Suddenly she looked up.

"Yvonne, have you ever caught Gene in some other girl's arms?"

"Oh, no," answered the maid, startled.

"Well don't, or you'll never know happiness again."

Yvonne puzzled over this advice for a moment. "At least I'd know the happiness of hushing his head in," she said stoutly.

"That's what happened to me last night. Not once, but twice. Besides that, I was left alone for dinner after the performance and had to eat by myself."

"What in the world?" cried Yvonne aghast.

"Philip never did come for me. I finally caught up with him in his apartment. He was with a blonde and he was dead drunk!" Connie revealed with growing indignation.

"Oh, how awful!" Yvonne looked at her wide eyed. She was one of Connie's most loyal admirers. It was inconceivable to her that anyone would treat her mistress so shamefully.

"Something happened to Philip last night," Connie speculated narrowly, "and I didn't find out what it was. It isn't like him to drink too much. And certainly it isn't like him to pass out."

"Maybe it was something he had to eat."

Connie ignored such a charitable explanation. She went on talking now, finding release in her words, unburdening her woes to a sympathetic listener.

"The blonde isn't apt to forget very soon. Not after what I did to her. I slapped her silly."

"It saved her right for being with him in your place," Yvonne declared.

"I wouldn't have minded so much, but I had an important business matter to take up with Philip. Of all nights for him to pull something like that!"

"It was most inconsiderate," Yvonne agreed indignantly.

"But that was only the beginning. After I'd taken out my anger on the blonde I left. It wouldn't have done any good to give Philip a piece of my mind. He was so stupid drunk he didn't even know I was there. Well, afterward, I decided to go to Larry's where I'd find solace and love. But—when I got to his room over O'Brien's saloon—" Connie had to pause at this moment to fight back her emotion again. "I—found him with a redhead!"

She barely got the words out before she burst into sobs. She folded her arms on the table and buried her face as her grief of last night descended upon her.

"Oh, you poor, poor baby," Yvonne said tenderly.

She jumped up and stood by Connie, patting her gently and trying to comfort her. Several minutes went by before Connie was once again in control of herself. Finally she sat up, her eyes red and tragic.

"Let me get you a fresh cup of coffee," said Yvonne. "It will make you feel better."

"Nothing will ever help me again," Connie sighed.

Yvonne poured the coffee and seated herself again at the table. "It may not be quite as bad as you think. Mr. Brooks didn't expect you last night, did he?"

"No, and that's the awful part."

Yvonne gave her a tender smile. "Probably it is to you and to

him, too. The point is, he wasn't expecting you. He surely wouldn't have been with another girl if he had."

"I hope not."

"For all he knew you were out with another man last night. Perhaps he was lonely, thinking of you. He may have turned to the other girl only in desperation. He couldn't love her any more than you."

"I don't know," Connie shook her head wearily.

"You should give him another chance, mademoiselle. You might discover that he is as heartbroken as you over the affair."

"He couldn't be."

"In France women try to consider all things. Don't judge your man hastily. Wait and see what happens."

Connie didn't know what more could possibly happen. She felt as if the roof had caved in on her. But Yvonne was right. Her counsel was practical, at any rate. Larry hadn't been expecting her and she had been out with another man—at least, she had planned to be.

But the thing that heaped insult on injury was that she had arranged to be with Philip purely for Larry's benefit. She had wanted to help him. And the idea of him shaking up with another girl while that was going on was a crowning injustice! The big lug couldn't have chosen a better way to offend her.

"There's nothing else I can do but wait and see what happens," Connie admitted finally.

They talked on for a while longer then Connie went to her room. She lay back down on her bed for a while but, tired as she was, she could not sleep. She still felt numb and grief-stricken when Yvonne knocked on her door at noon.

"Come in."

Yvonne stepped through the door. "Mr. Brooks is here to see you."

Connie's heart began to pound as she exchanged glances with Yvonne. She was swept by confusion. "Is—he is?"

"And unless I'm mistaken he's a very unhappy young man," Yvonne smiled. "Thus may be your chance, mademoiselle."

"Tell him I'll be out at a moment!"

Connie gave herself a hasty glance in the mirror. She looked simply awful but there was no time to do anything about it. She spent five frantic minutes trying to make herself presentable.

Just before she opened the door she drew herself up as coldly and aloofly as possible.

"Connie!" Larry cried, the instant she appeared. "I'm so sorry about last night. So very sorry."

She gave him an icy glance. "I'm surprised. You were doing what you wanted to do, no doubt."

"You don't understand, Connie," he said miserably. "Jane Vallier and I have known each other a long time. We've been good friends."

"So I learned," she replied with scathing sarcasm.

"I didn't know you were coming last night. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You would then have had a choice of two girls," she observed bitterly.

Larry gave her a pleading look. "But if I had known, there wouldn't have been a second thought. Actually I didn't invite Jane to my room. She just dropped in. She lives right across the hall."

"Oh, she does!" Connie glared. "Well, isn't that just dandy for you."

"I'm here to tell you how sorry I am and that Jane means nothing. I can hardly say more than that. After all, Connie, I wasn't the one who started this affair," he said, his voice suddenly quiet.

"No but you were perfectly willing to continue it."

"How could I resist you? You're the most marvelous girl in the world. Any man in my place would accept a bit of heaven, even though he knew it couldn't last."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, turning her eyes on him sharply.

"Some day, Connie, you'll find someone else. A man in your class. When that happens I know you'll forget about me. And that's all right. I'll always have my memories."

"What the hell are you talking about?" she flared. "Do you think you're just a passing fancy?"

"Yes, if you want the truth. I've thought that all along. I know I could never make you happy. I couldn't even begin to give you the things you want."

This little speech brought Connie up sharply. She stared at

him in consternation and bewilderment. In spite of the way she felt, her attitude changed abruptly. This was something different and entirely unexpected.

"You—you've really felt that way?" she said incredulously.

He nodded. Suddenly their eyes met. Connie forgot last night, she forgot everything as she realized how Larry felt about her. No! He mustn't feel that way. Her eyes filled with yearning and a desire to give him assurance.

"Larry, you've been wrong about me."

"Only time will tell that," he said, smiling sadly.

"You mustn't feel that way." She moved toward him.

All at once he ran to her and gathered her in his arms. Their lips met with such force that each was bruised, but neither cared about that. Connie's arms were about his neck so tightly that she thought she could never let him go. She almost fainted with the overwhelming tenderness she felt. Feeling herself locked in his embrace pushed all cares out of her mind.

"Larry, Larry—" she breathed.

"Forgive me for last night, darling," he begged.

"It didn't happen. I wasn't there. It was all a nightmare on my part. Only please don't let it happen again, Larry. Please!"

"I won't, Connie. That's a promise. But you must promise me too that you'll never pull a surprise visit like that on me again."

She drew back her head and peered up at him. His eyes remained on hers steadily. So that's how it was. Larry was willing to protect her from whatever other life he might lead, but to do so he insisted on her cooperation.

"I promise," she said but even as she spoke she realized that the arrangement was entirely unsatisfactory. Connie also realized that she had a rival in Jane Vallier, one that would have to be attended to as quickly as possible.

They sat down on the davenport. Connie was in no mood, at least for a while, to do any more talking. She needed caressing and petting to soothe her wounds from last night. She needed the sweetness of his embrace to assuage her aching heart. Quickly she curled up in his arms.

Fortunately Larry sensed her mood of the moment.

This pleasing scene was interrupted half an hour later by the buzzer at the door. Larry and Connie separated. Yvonne

appeared and looked quickly at her address for instructions as to whether or not the summons should be answered.

"It might just possibly be—" said Connie, her eyes narrow. All at once she looked at Larry. "Would you mind waiting in the bedroom?"

He frowned, but said, "Why no. I guess not."

When the bedroom door closed behind him Connie told Yvonne to see who it was. The maid opened the door. There, as Connie had guessed, stood Philip. He looked totally abject and woebegone.

"I just don't know where to begin, Connie," he apologized when he came in. "I shall never get over what happened last night."

"I shouldn't thank you would," she told him, her chin high.

"Somehow or other I lost control. That's the only way I can figure it out. Mind if I sit down?"

"Go right ahead."

Philip let himself down into a chair. He was still pretty badly hung over from his binges and his head throbbled remorselessly. His eyes hurt as he looked up at Connie.

"I'll do anything you say, my dear, to make up for it. My failure to keep our date was an unforgivable act, and I know it must have mortified you terrifically. It certainly did me when I woke up this morning and realized what had happened."

Connie's eyes lit up for a second at his words. All at once she realized the splendid bargaining position she was suddenly in. She suppressed a smile and regarded Philip sternly.

"Of course it's unforgivable. You acted like a cad."

"I know," he agreed in dismay. "And you're being very lenient, Connie, not to say anything worse. Isn't there anything I can do to patch things up, make you know how utterly humble I feel at this point?"

"I don't know."

She picked up a cigarette from a box on the cocktail table and lit it. Like a judge considering a sentence she walked across the room then returned and stood before him, her arms folded.

"Ordinarily, Philip, I'd have nothing to do with a man who makes such a spectacle of himself. There's only one thing in your favor."

He looked up at her hopefully and Connie went on. "I suspect that last night was not entirely your fault."

"But it was," he said, heaping reprobation on himself. "I was entirely to blame."

"Just how did you happen to be with Ginger Dees?"

"Well," Philip winced as his head gave a heavier than usual throb, "I was just leaving my apartment to get something to eat when the phone rang and it was Ginger."

"Just as I thought," said Connie.

"As it turned out she was looking for company for dinner so naturally I invited her to go along with me. I explained to her that I had a date with you after the show. It must have been the champagne that did it, but all at once I began to feel sick. The only thing I can say is that it was a good thing Ginger, or somebody, was with me. No telling where I might have ended up."

Philip stared gloomily at the rug. Every time he thought about last night his head ached even harder. He sat with his hands folded between his knees and his shoulders hunched.

"That snake-in-the-grass!" said Connie. "If you can't see what she was up to, you're blind."

"She didn't make me drink the champagne. I did that of my own accord," said Philip regretfully.

"I'll bet she made no effort to get you to stop."

"No," Philip agreed, "she didn't do that."

"Okay. A good deal of it I blame on Ginger."

"You're being very charitable to me, Connie. Probably more than I deserve."

"That's what you think!" She shot back. "Don't get it in your head for an instant that I'm willing to forgive and forget. When I think of how I wasted for you a half an hour in the foyer then finally had to go out and eat alone—I"

"Connie, please. I'm so terribly sorry and upset. Tell me what I can do to make amends. Is there anything?"

She let him suffer for several minutes before answering.

"There might be one thing you could do."

"All you have to do is name it, Connie." By this time he felt so miserable that he didn't care what happened. He wasn't interested in Ginger Dees. All he wanted was Connie. Last

night's dereliction had been a severe setback in his ultimate conquest of the dancer. He'd go to any length to make up for it.

"Actually what I have in mind is hardly a favor at all, since it'll be to your benefit as much as anybody's. I mentioned that new ballet I'm working on."

"Yes," said Philip, wishing there was some way to stop his head from feeling like an expanding and contracting balloon.

"It's about finished. The music is all done. I want Hoke to get the thing into production as rapidly as possible but that will take time. Meanwhile, we ought to introduce the music to the public. I want the Association to sponsor a recital to which we can invite the critics."

"That shouldn't be too hard to arrange," said Philip, finding it difficult to follow Connie's train of thought.

"Will you do it?"

"If it will make you happy, my dear."

Connie's spirits soared. It was all she could do to contain herself until she could get Philip out of her apartment. It took all the reserve she could muster to keep her voice even.

"Thank you, Philip."

He lumbered to his feet, feeling that he was getting off remarkably light. "There should be something more personal. I'd love to take you shopping this afternoon, Connie, but to tell you the truth I just don't feel up to it."

"Go on home, Philip," she said as an amused smile grazed her lips. "You're still half-crocked I do believe. You need to be in bed."

"You're the most understanding girl I've ever met."

She brushed his lips with a kiss. Philip reeled. He looked as if he were going to be drunk all over again but this time not from champagne. Adoration showed in his eyes. Connie walked to the door with him.

"I'll give you a ring in the morning, if that's okay," he said.

"It is, but don't make it early," Connie laughed.

The moment the door closed behind him she whirled and ran to the bedroom. Larry was standing by a window looking down on Manhattan as she burst in. To his amazement she did a quick entrechat and ran to him beaming.

"Larry! Did you hear? You're in!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE significance of Connie's words did not fully dawn on

Larry until several days later. Within moments after she had burst into the bedroom he completely forgot everything except Connie. He had never known such a girl and he had gone away walking on clouds.

About the same time that Larry was finding out what he was in for, so too was Philip. And while some benefit was likely to accrue to Larry as a result, Philip, on the contrary, faced nothing but expense.

The reaction of these two men stemmed directly from Connie's ability as an organizer. Within an hour after Larry had left her apartment—and two hours after Philip—Connie was on the phone making arrangements for the recital.

In four days time she had rented Crichton Hall, hired a promoter to see that the recital was well advertised, ordered the printing of invitations, set the date for ten days hence, notified the music critics, and committed the Ballet de la Roi Association to underwrite those things together with what other expenses would accrue in connection with the recital.

"If you haven't got white tie and tails you'd better make arrangements to rent them for that evening," she told Larry on the telephone at noon each day.

"What?" he asked surprised. "What's all that about, Connie?"

"Why—the recital. What else?"

There was a moment of silence at the other end. "Maybe you'd better bring me up to date, I haven't seen you for several days remember. Every time I've called you've been busy or hurrying somewhere."

Hastily she reviewed the plans she had made and was a little provoked with him that he gave out with an exclamation of astonishment.

"What the hell do you think I've been running my legs off for if it wasn't to get this thing going?" she demanded.

"Yes, I can see. You really have been busy," he said, swallow-

ing hard. All at once he was galvanised with the realization that this energetic ballet dancer had wangled him into a high toned recital at Crichton Hall. He had always dreamed of some day putting on a concert. He had never dreamed that he would be sitting down in white tie and tails to play a ragtime score for a ballet. "Ose what! I'm going to have to get into tip-top practice."

"You mean you haven't done a thing toward getting ready for the recital?" asked Connie.

"I guess I didn't fully realize what a fast worker you are."

When they hung up Connie called to Yvonne. The maid came in and listened to mademoiselle's orders.

"One of your jobs is to make a follow-up. Be sure to call Mr. Brooks tomorrow afternoon and remind him to rent a full dress suit if he hasn't already done so."

"Ose, I'll do that."

Connie had several other calls to make. One of them was to Hillard, the promoter, who had been frantically trying to reach her for two days. He wanted to know if it was all right to hire a mailing firm to handle the invitations. He couldn't possibly get them out with his limited office help. Connie told him to go ahead and those invitations damned well better be in the mail by tomorrow night. And he had one other thing, a bill from the printer for some hundred dollars and what was he to do about that. She told him to send it to Philip.

A few moments later she had Philip on the telephone. "The bills are starting to come in," she said. "I'm having them all sent to you."

"What bills?" he asked, blinking.

"The bills for the recital."

"Recital—?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she said exasperated. "The recital that Larry Brooks is going to give. Really Philip, I don't know what's gotten into you lately."

Neither did Philip. He felt a tangling at the back of his neck. He remembered, not too clearly, that he had agreed to something about a recital. Now all at once it was very important that he find out what he was in for, especially if bills were coming in.

He insisted that he come right over and have a talk with

Connie. She was busy but for once Philip demanded, and got, his way. Sitting on her divan in the living room, forty minutes later, he listened to the bad news.

"I guess I just didn't realize what you were talking about the other day," he said lamely when Connie had brought him up to date.

"I can't understand how that would be," she said indignantly. "I told you what I had in mind and you said to go right ahead."

"Don't get me wrong, Connie. I'm not trying to back out of it."

"You'd better not," she told him grimly.

"The first thing I've got to do is call an emergency meeting of the Association. There's liable to be some reaction to this," he said fearfully.

"Don't tell them to come here. I haven't got time. There're a thousand and one things yet to be done on the recital."

Philip left with the feeling that he'd been hit by a ton of bricks. That evening at a hastily called meeting of the Association in a private dining room of a mid-town hotel, Philip told the members what was going on. Things didn't start going badly for him until Mrs. Switzer inquired as to just how much was involved.

"As near as I can figure out we're committed for about five thousand," said Philip.

"What do you mean 'we'?" asked Mrs. Switzer clapping the table and sitting forward.

The other members agreed unanimously with her viewpoint and Philip began to perspire. The upshot of the meeting was that while the members didn't mind lending the Association's name to the recital, they refused to be assessed for something on which there had been no vote—no inkling, in fact—until now.

During the week that followed word began getting around about the ragtime recital, thanks to Hillard's efforts, and acceptance of the invitations began coming in. The whole thing was given quite a boost when it was let out that the renowned Constance Carter, premiere danseuse of the Ballet de la Roi, was planning on using the music in a new ballet.

The night before the recital, Connie arranged a dinner party



at O'Brien's saloon to honor Larry and wish him well. Philip balked like a mule when she suggested the Association members be invited. He'd go to just about any length for her but that was too far. If the Association knew Larry was a piano player in a Third Avenue tavern they'd withdraw even their nominal support.

"All right, then," she said when she saw he was determined, "whom do you want to ask?"

"I don't want to ask anybody to go to a place like that," said Philip nettled.

"But the arrangements have all been made. O'Brien is going to have a table set for twelve."

"Invite whom you like. Some of the troupe would like to go no doubt. Bob Walker and Ginger Doss will be glad to come, I know."

For once Philip felt that Connie had gone too far. He was displeased and made little attempt to hide it. Thus far he had gotten stuck for all the bills for the rental. And if that weren't bad enough, Connie was arranging a dinner which in all likelihood Philip would have to pay for as well. There was a limit somewhere and he had just about reached it.

Connie was smart enough to know this. She said no more except to tell him to go ahead and invite Walker and Ginger Doss if he wanted. She called Jack Clayton and asked him to round up some of the boys and girls of the ballet for the dinner after the show.

The party lent a festive air to O'Brien's that night. With such a gay and glamorous crowd from the Ballet du Roi, O'Brien outdid himself. He brought several rounds of drinks on the house and before long everyone but Philip was beginning to enjoy himself.

Larry did a splendid job of entertaining at the piano. Connie herself announced that tomorrow night he would present the new ballet music to the world and proposed a toast to his success. They all drank. This time even Philip joined in but he showed no enthusiasm. Sitting between Connie and Ginger, he got far more attention from the blonde than he did from Connie.

Jane Volmer, one of the waitresses assigned to the table, watched these goings-on with more than a little suspicion. She

saw that Connie Carter had eyes for nobody in that room but her boy, Larry. She was provoked that these people should barge in like this and upset the quiet order of O'Brien's saloon, and of her own satisfactory life. She got so nervous while serving the meal that she set a plate of noodles in front of Philip who finally had to complain to the manager that he ordered a steak as well and would not pay his bill until he got it.

The people from the ballet got lively by one-thirty and began dancing in back of the saloon to Larry's music. Bobm Walker took one look at the tempting bosoms and flashing legs of the ballerinas, drained his glass and joined them. Connie sat at the piano beside Larry. The only ones who remained seated at the table were Philip and Ginger Doss.

"There's something more going on here than meets the eye," Ginger commented.

"A lot of expense. I know that much," Philip muttered dejectedly.

"Unless I'm mistaken your girl friend has got a yen for that piano player."

Thus was not a new thought to Philip. It had been a growing source of irritation and annoyance in the back of his mind for a couple of weeks. But because it was an unwelcome thought he had tried to ignore it. Ginger's remark had come at a time when Philip's morale was at a low ebb. Suddenly it struck him that here was the cause of all his recent troubles.

"They've been doing a lot of work on the new ballet," he said, glancing toward the piano. Larry was smiling at Connie as he played.

"That's not all they've been doing, if I'm any judge."

Philip stared gloomily into space as Ginger watched him carefully from the corners of her eyes. The blonde knew that her words had struck home. She smiled to herself as she prepared to take full advantage of this opportunity.

"You're the most conservative man I've ever met, Philip," she said presently.

He looked around at her and smiled wanly. "Sometimes I wonder if it pays to be that way."

"Of course it does. I think you're sweet and it's a downright shame that you're not having any fun tonight. How would you like to dance with me?"

Philip was not in the dancing mood but at this point he didn't much care what he did. He nodded and they got up. The minute he put his arm around Ginger's waist she pressed against him, following his lead as if she were a part of him. Philip found this contact increasingly pleasant as they danced.

"I didn't know you were such a good dancer," Ginger murmured in his ear.

"I'm not. I always feel old-fashioned on a dance floor."

"There's nothing old-fashioned about you, sweetie," she said flatteringly.

Within a very few minutes Ginger had succeeded in partially restoring Philip's ego. Later, back at the table, she got him to have a drink with her. After one, he was in a receptive mood for another. An hour later a rosy glow had descended upon him and he basked in the warmth of Ginger's inviting smile.

"Why are we staying here?" she asked quietly.

"Are you tired of the party, Ginger?" he leered hugely.

She nodded.

"So am I."

In a manner they hadn't been with the party for an hour. It swirled about them, loudly and gaily, but no one was paying any attention to them. When they arose from the table and left the saloon their absence left no vacancy whatever. Connie was absorbed with Larry at the piano and the others were having too much fun on the dance floor.

It wasn't until four a.m. when the party began to deteriorate and O'Brien finally decided he had better close up, that Philip's presence, or lack of it, took on any significance. O'Brien stood there with the check, scratching his head. Finally he went over to Connie, and held out the check to her.

"Who do I give this to, Miss Carter?"

"Philip. He'll take care of it."

"But where is he?"

Connie looked around. Come to think of it she hadn't seen him for some time. She turned to Robben Walker but he was no help. He sat in his chair, out cold, with his head resting on a ballerina's shoulder.

"Have you seen Philip lately, Larry?" she asked.

Larry smiled and shook his head. "I haven't seen anybody but you and that piano all night long."

"Come to think of it, Ginger Doss isn't here, either," said Connie, her eyes narrowing.

"But the check," O'Brien interrupted with an air of uneasiness.

"Don't worry," said Connie grimly. "You'll get your money."

"Tonight?"

"I'm afraid the host has taken a powder on us. You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"Do you think he could pay for it?" asked O'Brien, pointing to Robben Walker.

"If you can wake him up he might."

Several willing hands went to work on Robben without success. In the end he had to be carried out to a taxi and one of the male dancers and a ballerina volunteered to see him home. Within a very few minutes all had departed except Connie and the employees who were cleaning the place up.

"I'll run you up to your apartment in a taxi," Larry told her.

"Better not. You need some sleep. You've got to be in shape for the recital," she told him lovingly. "I'll get home by myself. Damn Philip anyway!"

O'Brien was hovering anxiously around her, still holding the check. Finally she took it from him.

"Look, I haven't got money like this with me," she told him flatly. "You'll just have to wait. I'll have Philip send you a check. Will you trust us that far?"

"Of course, Miss Carter," said O'Brien unhappily. There was nothing else he could do.

Connie stuffed the check in her purse. She gave Larry a kiss right in front of Jane Vollmer and everybody and told him she'd see him tomorrow night at the recital. With that Connie left. She rode alone in a taxi to her apartment. She felt wonderful over the prospects of Larry's success tomorrow night. And she envisioned the time, in the not too distant future, when he could move from Third Avenue and join her in the world of success and enchantment.

The only dark cloud on Connie's horizon was Philip's growing independence. Twice, now, he had forsaken her for Ginger Doss. There was no doubt in her mind that his disappearance tonight

was directly connected with Ginger. Connie couldn't have that. Not for a while, yet. Until she had accomplished her ambition for Larry, she had to have Philip's support.

## CHAPTER NINE

"NO, Mr. Hathaway is not at home, Miss Carter. Furthermore, he gave me instructions, in the event you called, to extend his regrets that he will be unable to attend the recital tonight."

This calm but significant speech was delivered by Perkins early the following afternoon when Connie telephoned Philip about the bill he had failed to pay at O'Brien's saloon last night. Connie was speechless with surprise for a moment.

"Where can I reach him?" she demanded ominously.

"At his office I presume."

Connie hung up. She sat by the phone a minute, her lips compressed and her eyes flashing fire. Ginger Dees had been at work again! Sternly Connie dialed Philip's office number.

"May I speak to him please," she said when his secretary answered. "This is Miss Carter calling."

"Sorry, Miss Carter, but he said to tell you that he was in a conference."

"When will he be finished?"

"He said he'd be busy all the rest of the day."

"Get him on the phone," Connie ordered, her patience at an end.

"Mr. Hathaway's instructions were rather emphatic, Miss Carter. I'm sorry, but he's not to be disturbed."

Connie banged down the receiver. Viciously she kicked a slipper aside as she stood up. It was evident to her now that she was going to be inconvenienced. She was going to have to take time out to get Philip back on the beam. He would choose a time like this to act up!

She called Yvonne and told her to get out a tight-fitting dark dress, a pair of dark hose and a necklace of pearls. While Yvonne prepared her apparel Connie took a quick shower.

Afterward she sprayed herself liberally with cologne, gave careful attention to her make-up and got into her clothes.

Half an hour later she was on her way to the financial district in a taxi. There had been several things she had wished to do this afternoon but she had to defer them for this, of all things! Philip was a nuisance, albeit a necessary one.

His office was on the top floor of a building on Church Street. When Philip's secretary tried to impede her progress into his private office, Connie withered her with a glance and marched right on into the oak-paneled room. Philip's jaw dropped when he saw her.

"We might just as well have it out right now, Philip," she said, sitting down in a chair beside his desk and crossing her slender knees. "You've been giving me the runaround and I don't like it one bit!"

Philip recovered from his astonishment. "Frankly, Connie, that's exactly how I feel about you."

"What right have you to say that?"

"You've been making a play for that Larry Brooks."

"I've been working on a ballet with him. One that will get even more customers into your show. That's what I've been doing!" she said evenly.

"I don't doubt that, Connie. When it comes to work you've never been one to avoid it. I admire you greatly for that."

"All right then—"

"But that doesn't mean," he cut in, "that you haven't at the same time found him attractive. You have and I know it."

Their eyes locked. His words were too assured for Connie to believe otherwise. Philip's deduction was correct and she wouldn't fool him trying to hide it. Rather than lose the initiative she seized upon the first thing to come to her mind.

"And I don't think I'm too far wrong in saying that you've found Ginger Dees rather interesting."

Philip's eyes showed guilt for a fraction of a second but that was long enough for Connie to learn that the initiative was still in her hands. He moved slightly in his chair.

"She offered me companionship," he said.

"Take in a row you've left me alone for her. Let's get this straight right now, Philip. If you prefer her to me, say so. I want to know where I stand and I want to find out this minute."

Philip looked cornered. This desirable girl who confronted him might be lost to him forever if he called her hand now. He was torn between a desire to stand pat and the fear of defeat if he did.

"Can there really be any doubt in your mind, Connie?"

"There most certainly can. How do you think I felt last night, riding home by myself? How do you think I felt the other night standing there in the theater waiting, while you were out carousing with her?" she replied angrily.

Philip averted his eyes. In doing so he glimpsed an attractive glossy knee mounted upon another. A pang stabbed his heart.

"I'm sorry about that," he said miserably. "I thought I'd made that clear."

Connie sensed victory, but she kept on punching. "And then what did you do to me today? You left word with your brother and your secretary that you didn't want to see me. You actually wanted to avoid me, Philip, just as if I were a tramp!"

"Please, Connie. Don't talk that way," Philip begged.

She sat there glaring at him, bearing him with the full force of her indignation. Philip sighed. He was trapped by his longing passion for this girl.

"Forgive me, Connie. Let's not argue any longer."

"Not until we get a couple of other things straightened out. Why aren't you going to the rental tonight?"

"Well, I just didn't see much point in it."

"You've got a date with Ginger," Connie accused.

Philip stared uncomfortably. "I wasn't particularly keen about it, but—"

"Why did you make the date?" she asked thinly.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. But, if this rental is really important to you, I can probably change my plans."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of interfering with your fun!" she told him caustically. Quickly she opened her purse and pulled out the check from O'Brien's. "And another thing. What do you intend doing about this?"

She tossed it onto the desk before him. He stared at it blankly. All at once Connie stood up. She knew, without having to be told, that she had accomplished her mission.

"I can't waste any more time, Philip. I hope that the future you'll decide to play fair with me."

She turned and started for the door. Philip didn't say anything until she had almost reached it.

"About this tab from O'Brien's, Connie. Suppose you come by the apartment tonight after the rental. I'll be happy to give you a check for it then."

Connie halted. Her long lashes blinked. She looked around at him quickly, as if she thought he was joking. A slow smile had crossed Philip's lips. She measured him carefully and all at once she knew that he had come up with a trump.

"You have a date with Ginger. You just got through telling me that."

"I'm taking her to dinner. I'll be rid of her by midnight."

Connie decided on a bluff. "Now look, Philip. Tonight's the rental and if you think I'm going to—"

"This check, Connie is for a rather large sum. I don't mind paying it. Surely, under the circumstances, it's not asking too much of you to drop around for the money."

Again their eyes met and this time it was Connie who felt the pressure. Her whole career had been built on his money. If suddenly he should withdraw his support, her crash would be even more sensational than her rise to stardom.

"It so happens that there's to be a dinner for Larry at Sardi's after the rental. Several critics have been invited," she said, her eyes more alert.

"Who's going to pay for that?"

"It's a legitimate expense for the Association. They're the ones who'll ultimately benefit if the critics give us good reviews."

"Then suppose we make it one o'clock. That will give you enough time."

She gazed at him in silence across the room, but Philip sat in his chair unmoved. All at once her chin came up. She turned abruptly and went out. Just before the door closed behind her she heard Philip give a faint chuckle. Connie groped her way to the elevator blind with fury.

It took a good deal of effort for her to compose herself as she rode back uptown. Philip had her, it appeared, over the barrel. She spent the remainder of the afternoon trying to figure some way out but she could think of nothing.

be awfully disappointed. She had planned this night for him. If she went to Philip's she would have to give Larry a logical excuse for running out on the party. She wouldn't dare tell him the truth.

Connie was in a cantankerous mood as she dressed for the recital that night. She spoke sharply to Yvonne, criticized the dressmaker who had provided her garment for the occasion, and took time out to call Hillard and raise holy hell with him for not getting better announcements in the evening papers.

She arrived alone but with considerable fanfare at Crichton Hall at eight-thirty. Several press photographers took flash pictures of her as she joined the milling crowd in the lobby and for this purpose she managed a brilliant smile. Less than five hundred persons were present but that filled the Hall to capacity.

There was nothing disappointing about the turnout. Hillard had done a rather good job after all. Connie was further gratified that the recital had attracted the attention of many big name producers and impresarios whom she glimpsed in the well-dressed audience.

At a quarter to nine the house lights dimmed. The curtain went up and a spotlight framed the concert grand on the stage. An instant later Larry came out, resplendent in white tie and tails. There was polite but scattered applause for this unknown. Connie's heart bled for him, knowing the strain he must be under.

But if Larry was nervous, no one knew it. He sat down at the piano and without further delay played through a brief and conventional number. This was his warm-up, and the applause it drew was still polite but scattered.

He took a five minute break off-stage then returned for the main event. A hush fell over the audience as Larry himself announced the opus, explained its origin and purpose for the ballet, then in good taste requested the audience's indulgence.

What happened after that made musical history of a sort. He sat down and began a full rendition of the ragtime score he had composed. It wasn't that the music was so outstanding, nor that its execution was so technically perfect. What intrigued everyone was that here in staid Crichton Hall, before a rather

impressive gathering, a ragtime piano player was making people tap their feet.

Larry played for all as if he were back in O'Brien's saloon. The rhythmic beat of the melody and its accompaniment filled the air and penetrated to the latent rowdy natures of all those present. It was loud, rough and ribald, but there was no getting around it, it was entertainment. He was smiling happily when he finished, forty-five minutes later.

Whistles, applause and cheers broke out the instant he made his bow. Larry beamed back in the spotlight. Then suddenly he stepped forward and peered over the footlights. When he spied Connie in the second row he beckoned to her.

She ran up and joined him on the stage, so choked up with happiness and excitement that she was afraid to say anything to him lest she burst into tears. Together they bowed as the applause and cheers continued.

The moment the curtain came down she threw her arms around him. "Oh, Larry, it was marvelous."

"Do you think it went over?" was the first thing he asked.

"Didn't you hear them clapping?" she smiled.

And reached to kiss him briefly.

That was all they got to say to each other for a while. The next moment, they were engulfed by a small group of newspaper critics and reporters. Hillard was on hand with releases giving Larry's background. Several wanted to know when Miss Carter was going to present the new ballet set to the music. One asked if Miss Carter and Mr. Brooks happened to be engaged at something.

When all questions were answered, save the last, Larry went to a dressing room and changed. He returned Connie and the half dozen others who had been invited and they all set out for Sardi's. The dinner was quite a success and the critics enjoyed themselves as the hovering waiters kept the champagne buckets filled.

It was after midnight before Connie let herself face up to the problem that lay ahead. Larry was talking to a critic who sat on the other side of him when she gave a tug at his sleeve. He looked around happily.

"Larry, I meant to tell you earlier in the evening that I can't stay. I—"

"Never mind," he said, putting her hand, "I'm just as anxious to get out of here as you are."

"But we can't leave our guests. Someone has to stay."

A slight frown crossed his brow. "I thought we were going to—"

"I can't tonight, Larry. I—I'm simply worn out. This is my night off from the ballet, you know. And I've simply got to get some rest."

She bit her lip at the disappointment that leaped into his eyes. They stared at each other for a moment.

"Gosh. I didn't know you felt like that, Connie. Why didn't you tell me? I'll take you home whenever you say."

"No. You've got to stay with these people. It's your party."

At that remark Larry was seized with an entirely new thought. He had a presentiment of impending doom when the party broke up and the waiter would come around with the check. He didn't even have enough money in his pocket to leave a decent tip.

"Connie," he whispered frantically, "I can't—"

"Oh please, honey," she begged, "I know how you feel. I'm just as disappointed as you are."

Larry swallowed hard. "But—but what will we do?"

"Tomorrow night. I promise, Larry."

"Tomorrow night?" he echoed incredulously.

"Yes. Meet me after the show."

He gazed at her as if she had suddenly lost her marbles. Then realization came to him. "What I'm talking about is the bill we've run up here."

There was a short pause then Connie burst out laughing. "Stilly, just tell them to send it to the Association. I'll speak to the headwaiter on the way out."

"Whow. I was worried for a moment," he said, greatly relieved. Then quickly he added, "You're wonderful, Connie. Please don't think I'm utterly stupid. Sure I'm disappointed about tonight, but I'll be there tomorrow, even if O'Brien fires me."

She gave his hand a squeeze and got up from the table. After

saying goodnight to the guests she went out. Her parting mood lasted only until she got to the curb and into a taxi. She gave the driver Philip's address.

Just at that moment another taxi pulled up in front to let out a passenger. Connie's driver leaned on his horn. She looked up to see what was causing his agitation. But the sight that greeted her caused her far more than it did him.

Ginger Doss, her blonde hair recently and expertly coiffed, got out of the cab alone and walked blithely into Sardi's. Before Connie could recover from her surprise, her driver backed the taxi away from the curb. A second later she was being whisked off to her destination with Philip.

## CHAPTER TEN

PHILIP awaited her in his living room. He was relaxed and at ease in a plaid flannel jacket with a pipe to confirm the informality of the occasion. A bottle of imported whiskey, a silver ice bucket and a bottle of soda were on a tray with glasses and some canapés. He smiled at her affectionately when she came in.

"I'm so glad you decided to come, Connie. Until you walked in I wasn't sure I'd be seeing you again."

Connie ignored his remark. "What was Ginger Doss going into Sardi's for a few minutes ago?"

"Was she?" he said blandly.

"Yes. And I don't think it was a coincidence." She eyed him closely.

"How should I know? I left her at eleven o'clock so I could hurry home and be ready when you arrived, my dear."

She made no effort to conceal her skepticism. Philip had known that she and Larry would be at Sardi's tonight. She had told him herself that afternoon. But she didn't know how Ginger Doss would have come by the information. It was a good bet she had learned it from Philip.

"Fix you a drink?" Philip peered at her questioningly through his glasses.

Connie was still pondering the calgula of Ginger showing up at Bardi's. She couldn't figure the angle. There was no point in her going there with the idea of musing in on Larry's party. What if she did? It still wouldn't mean anything. She sighed. "Yes, I'll have one."

He made two drinks and sat down beside her on the large divan. "You have no idea what this means to me, having you here tonight."

"It means you fork over the dough for that party at O'Brien's, for one thing. And I told them at Bardi's to mail you the tab for the party tonight," said Connie crisply.

"It's worth it, my dear," he said, patting her knee. "I'd pay for a dozen more parties if it makes you happy. I'd pay for a hundred. I think you know that by now."

"Yes, I believe you would."

"Here's to us, Connie," he said lifting his glass.

She joined him in the toast, not because she agreed with it, but because she wanted a drink. She needed several in view of what lay ahead of her. Watching Philip just now had convinced her more than ever that she had found her true love at last in Larry Brooks. But Connie had to remain practical until she had gotten what she wanted.

The room was full of morning sunlight when she awoke. A disgusted look came into her eyes.

"Good morning," Philip smiled, as he came in.

Connie looked at him. "You needn't get up, Philip. Go back to sleep."

"That wouldn't be very hospitable of me," he said. "Can't we have a cup of coffee before you go?"

"Oh, sure, sure. I guess so," she said.

They went to the dining room where he instructed Butkins to bring them some coffee and toast.

"And how about some morning papers?" Connie called to the valet.

Butkins brought her a paper. Excitement leaped into Connie's eyes as she took it and turned quickly to the entertainment page. She flung her arms apart, opening the paper, then closed them again as her glance settled on the account of the recent last night.

"Hey, listen to this!" she exclaimed.

She read the account out loud for Philip's benefit. The writer wasn't impressed by Larry's ability as a pianist but he had been taken by the music he had composed. The article ended up by predicting success for any ballet set to the score.

"How about that?" Connie put down the paper and grinned at Philip.

"It's fair enough."

"I think it's splendid. The critics could have murdered us if they had wanted to."

"Us?" Philip glanced at her obliquely.

"Sure. They're talking about us. The Ballet du Rod Association. If they hadn't liked Larry they'd have panned us for sponsoring him. This justifies our faith."

"I'm not convinced that it justifies all the money I've put out," he said drily.

"You'll get your money back," she replied in cool, clipped words. "The ballet we put on will be the biggest thing since *Lafayette*. You've got to admit, Philip, that my judgment in such matters hasn't gone far wrong in times past."

"Forget I mentioned it," he said as Butkins came in with their breakfast. "This morning I don't regret anything."

Connie buttered a piece of toast and bit it grimly. Half an hour later she was ready to go.

"Shall I call for you tonight?" he asked as Butkins held her coat.

"No. This is one night I'm keeping for myself," Connie lied. "I've been on the go for days. Tonight I'm going to rest and take things easy."

"Very well, my dear," he said, kissing her tenderly. "I'll call you tomorrow."

The instant Connie was out the door she felt a great relief. She had fulfilled her end of the bargain with Philip. He couldn't complain. From now on she was going to have things more her own way. Quickly she walked to the elevator.

Yvonne let her in when she reached her own apartment twenty minutes later. Connie greeted her gaily and asked if anyone had called, thinking that Larry might have endeavored to reach her that morning.

"No mademoiselle."

"It's early," said Connie breathily.

"Do you care for some coffee?"

"I've already had a cup but I could stand another. Bring it to me in the living room. I want to get out of these clothes."

She changed into lounging pajamas and came back into the living room a few minutes later. Yvonne brought in a cup of coffee on a tray and served it.

"Tonight," said Connie, her eyes sparkling, "I've got big plans."

Yvonne smiled questioningly.

"Tonight," Connie repeated, "I want you to be with your Gene. Go anywhere you like, only don't come home."

"I understand," said the maid.

"Tonight I'm going to have heaven. And I don't want anybody to interfere. You don't even have to come home to fix breakfast in the morning, Yvonne."

"But I must come home some time," she laughed.

"If you're held by noon that will be plenty of time."

"Mademoiselle is really planning a big time," Yvonne admiringly.

"You bet I am, and it's only the beginning!" Connie smiled determinedly. "From now on things are going to be a lot different around here. Mr. Philip Hathaway is due for a shock."

Ethically Connie finished her coffee. She went to her bedroom and spent an hour treating herself to a luxurious bath. Later Yvonne came in and gave her a facial massage. She worked over Connie's hair then gave it a soft, soothing brushing.

Connie spent the afternoon lazily in bed, dozing and dreaming. Toward evening she got up, feeling like a new person.

That night at the theater, the lucky ticket holders were treated to one of the finest performances ever put on. Miss Constance Carter was in excellent form. Her dancing was superb and her enthusiasm inspired the other members of the ballet to put forth their best efforts.

Never had the Libretto ballet been rendered with such verve and excitement. Everyone, on both sides of the footlights, was keyed up for the great climax. And when Connie and her partner arrived upon the powerful scene over the wings backstage were crowded with spellbound collectors.

During the first few moments of it, the nymph almost made a monkey out of the satyr by the nimble dexterity with which she eluded him. The whole thing might have turned into a farce had not the satyr, his professional vanity suddenly lashed, taken out after Connie as if he really meant to catch her.

In the orchestra pit, the conductor, seeing what was going on, waved his baton wildly in an effort to keep the music abreast of the rapid action. Out of sheer mischief and exuberance Connie fled about the stage with the satyr whizzing after her frantically to slow down so he could catch her.

He was so winded that he almost didn't make it when it came time for him to fling her onto his shoulder. And he was really in a bad way when it came his turn to flee. Connie did three magnificent leaps while her partner ambled doggedly about the stage. The audience was already applauding before she executed the final leap which landed her astride the exhausted satyr with such force that his collapse was supremely realistic. When the curtain fell she arose from him and had to help him to his feet so they could take their bows.

Six curtain calls were demanded by the whistling and cheering audience. In the wings when it was all over Connie was surrounded by admiring fellow performers who congratulated her on the greatest dancing of her meteoric career. Even her partner came over, still panting, perspiring profusely, and grudgingly complimented her.

"What got into you tonight, Connie?" he asked.

She laughed delightedly. "You were great, Tony. If I hadn't begun to feel sorry for you we might be out there yet."

"Another performance like that and you'll have to break in another partner." He walked away shaking his head.

Connie rested a few minutes in her dressing room. Her heart sang. In just about half an hour she'd be with Larry. She could already see him, proud and erect from his triumphant recital last night. Together they would select which of the most famous New York restaurants they would favor with their patronage. Tonight was theirs. Wherever they went they would be pointed out as the renowned Miss Carter and the newly celebrated Mr. Brooks.

She freshened herself and got dressed. After a final satisfied



inspection of herself in the mirror, she hastened to the foyer to join Larry. Several persons were standing about but she didn't see him. These people, it turned out, wanted her autograph on the playbill. Connie favored them obligingly, keeping an eye out for Larry.

She was surprised that he was not already here. Two or three people still idled about, thrilled to be so close to the famous dancer. She wished they'd go away, and where the devil was Larry anyway? Her brows knitted as she tried to appear casual for the benefit of those who lingered.

"We can't conceive that you're not waiting for someone, Miss Carter. But if you aren't we'd be mighty proud to take you any place you say," said one admiring couple.

"Thank you, no. I am waiting for someone," she managed to smile.

And her confusion grew as she continued to wait. In time she was left alone in the foyer with no one but the janitor who was sweeping up.

"Anything I can do for you, Miss Carter?" he asked.

"No thanks, Joe. My date was due here twenty minutes ago. I can't imagine what's happened."

"I can't either. If I was a young blade you're one girl I'd never keep waiting. That's for sure!"

She waited ten more minutes. Then all at once she grew hot and uncomfortable with the feeling that Larry wasn't coming for her. She couldn't understand it. Real fear swept through her. She had Joe unlock the office for her so she could make a telephone call.

Urgently she dialed the number to O'Brien's saloon.

"Let me speak to O'Brien," she said, her voice almost frantic.

"Speakin', Miss."

"This is Connie Carter. Is Larry there?"

"No. He sure isn't."

Connie's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Then—then where is he?"

"I wish I knew, Miss Carter. I gave him last night off. He said he wanted tonight off too but I asked him to come in and play during the early part of the evening at least. That's because people are coming here more and more to hear him.

We're doing a fine business all of a sudden and—"

"Where is he?" She almost shouted over the phone.

"I said I don't know. He didn't come in tonight like he said he would, even for the early part of the evening."

"You—you mean he hasn't been there since yesterday?"

"That's right."

"Oh," she choked back a fearful sob. For a moment she sat there holding the telephone in her hand. Then suddenly she grabbed it. "Where can we look for him?"

"Got no idea."

Connie hung up stupefied. Her mind whirled with all sorts of foreboding thoughts. If anything had happened to him surely she'd have heard. But he hadn't been seen by O'Brien for two days. What on earth could have happened?

She racked her brain for some course of action. She could think of nothing to do, no one to turn to. The only people who might have any clue at all were sighted over there on Third Avenue. Suddenly she jumped up. That was the place for her, at least as a start. She'd have to go there and enlist O'Brien's help at once.

Connie jumped into a taxi outside the theater and told the driver to hurry over to O'Brien's. Halfway across town she urged him to more speed.

"Look, lady," he said caustically over his shoulder, "you want to get there in one piece don't you?"

When they arrived Connie flung him some dollar bills and ran into the saloon. The place was quite noisy and full of more people than she had ever seen in there before. Hastily she sought out O'Brien.

"Larry was supposed to meet me tonight after the show," she said, gazing at him frenetically. "But he didn't show up, and he didn't call."

"It beats me where he went," said O'Brien helplessly.

"But haven't you got any clue? Can you think of any place or any reason?"

"None. None."

"That girl—uh—the waitress. Do you think she'd know?" said Connie indicating Jane Vallmer. She reasoned that since Jane lived across the hall from Larry, she might know something more than O'Brien.

"Hey, Jane. Come over here a minute," O'Brien called. When the waitress walked over he asked, "Got any idea where Larry is tonight?"

Jane gave Connie a frosty glance. "He came in early this morning with a bad hangover. He went out again this afternoon. Said he was meeting a friend. I thought it was you."

"He was supposed to meet me tonight after the show, but he didn't."

Jane's eyes widened. The coldness went out of them and she grew concerned. "Then I can't imagine—"

"Something's happened!" Connie declared. She was sure of it now.

"Maybe we ought to call the police," O'Brien suggested after thinking it over.

The three of them stood there debating what to do. At that moment the door to the saloon opened and all three stared as Larry came tottering in. His hat was pushed back on his head and a foolish, alcoholic smile was spread across his countenance. On his arm, smiling brightly, was Ginger Doss.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONNIE reacted on impulse to spring at the girl and lay her flat with a volley of rights and lefts. Twice, now, she had waited in the foyer of the theater for dates who didn't show up. Each time Ginger had been at the bottom of it. She glared at the girl like a tigress, but held back only because Larry was there.

"What's the meaning of this?" she growled.

Larry looked at her blankly. She wasn't even sure he recognized her. Ginger, however, had not had nearly so much to drink. She looked at Connie gaily.

"Hi, there. We didn't expect to find you here."

"Just what are you up to, Ginger?" Connie demanded.

"Nothing at all," said the blonde lightly. "He asked me to go to dinner with him this evening. And that's where we've been."

Connie turned her gaze to Larry. He stood there, weaving precariously. Just then O'Brien stepped up and guided him to a chair. Larry sat down heavily.

"He's so pie-eyed he doesn't know anything," O'Brien commented.

"Maybe we'd better get him upstairs and into bed," Jane suggested.

"Don't you dare touch him!" Connie ordered. She sat down at the table beside him and searched his eyes beseechingly. "Larry, what happened? What's the matter?"

Larry's head reared back. He tried to focus her with his eyes. He mumbled something unintelligible then just sat there swaying. Connie bit her lip. Larry was blind drunk. She'd get nothing out of him when he was like this. Bitterly she stood up.

"Hey, Sam, gimme a hand here, will you?" O'Brien called.

One of the bartenders came over. He took one look at Larry and smiled. At O'Brien's order he helped lift him to his feet. The two men helped Larry out of the bar.

"We'll put him to bed then be right back," called O'Brien over his shoulder.

The three girls looked at each other. All three would have dropped dead on the spot if looks could kill. Jane Vollmer was the first to speak.

"Until people like you two started showing up here, this was a nice little joint. Now look at it."

Ginger looked around amused. "Business appears to have picked up some."

"You bet it has," said Jane sourly. "All the screwballs in town are turning up here."

With that she stalked off to take care of a number of customers who were waiting impatiently for more drinks. Ginger bit down the collar of her coat.

"Well, I guess I'll be trotting along."

"Oh, no you don't!" Connie grabbed her arm and spun her around. "Sit down there, you! There're quite a few things I want to find out."

Ginger looked her over insolently. "I've taken all the pushing around from you that I intend to," she warned.

"I don't know what your game is, but I'll tell you one thing for sure! You damn well better sit down or I'm going to throw

the books into that dumb-witted friend of yours, Bob Walker. I know he's trying to get a contract out of Philip. One word from me and he won't even get a kind word. Now, are you going to sit down?"

Ginger thought that over. All at once she shrugged and sat down. A waiter came over immediately when Connie joined her. Ginger ordered a highball and Connie, not to be outdone, ordered one herself. When the waiter went off she eyed the blonde narrowly.

"Okay. What's your game? This sort of thing doesn't happen to Philip, then to Larry by coincidence."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What were you doing at Sardi's last night?"

Ginger quickly covered the surprise that came to her eyes. "Maybe that's none of your business."

"What were you doing there? Either you tell me or I'm going to call Philip this instant."

"Go ahead. Call him," Ginger smiled. "He was the one who suggested I go there."

Connie's mouth dropped. She looked at Ginger in disbelief. Why would Philip put her up to a thing like that? So many questions suddenly filled her mind that she paid no attention when Ginger arose and with a mocking smile went out of the saloon.

It was possible, of course, that Ginger was lying. Connie didn't for a minute believe it to be the whole truth. She needed to find out from Larry what had happened. While she was considering what to do next, O'Brien and Sam, the bartender, came back. O'Brien joined her at the table.

"We got him to bed, all right."

"Did he say anything?" Connie asked.

"Not a word. He's so drunk that he's agreeable to anything. Can I buy you another drink, Miss Carter?"

Connie looked at her glass. She hadn't even realized that it was empty. She nodded. O'Brien signaled for a couple of drinks, then turned to Connie again.

"It's downright remarkable what's happened around here since you started patronizing us. You know, my business has almost doubled."

"No," she replied, not even considering his words.

"That's a fact. I guess it's a result of the publicity and the fact that a celebrity like you comes in here, Miss Carter. Of course, Larry is a good piano player. People like to listen to his music and now that he's gotten attention he's a right nice drawing card. I'm going to increase his pay."

All at once she realized what he had said. She glanced at him. "Larry is cut out for better things than this."

"What's wrong with playing the piano here?" he asked.

"Nothing, but you can't afford to pay him what he's worth."

"Believe me, Miss Carter, I'm going to pay him well enough to keep him. The only thing is, I can't have him showing up drunk like this very often. That's the only exception I'll make."

Connie had other plans for Larry. She finished her drink and stood up. O'Brien arose with her and invited her to come in any time she wanted to. From now on she could have all the drinks she wanted for free. Connie managed a civil answer but that was all.

Outside she glanced back to see if anyone inside the saloon was watching her. Casually she moved into the shadows then ducked purposefully into the doorway that led upstairs. Inside she ran up the steps, found Larry's room and entered it. She turned on a light.

Larry was in bed asleep. She went over and shook him. He grunted and rolled over. Connie looked around. She found a wash cloth and held it under the cold water faucet in the basin. When it was thoroughly chilled she returned to the bed and laid it on Larry's face.

He groaned. She talked to him gently as she bathed his face. With persistence she finally got him into a sitting position.

"Come on, honey, we're getting out of here," she murmured.

Larry gave a meaningless answer but submitted docilely as she helped him on with his clothes. She finally got him dressed after fifteen minutes. The problem now was to get him downstairs. They stumbled down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. A cruising taxi pulled over to the curb a moment later. The driver helped Larry in. He fell asleep the moment he hit the leather cushion.

She was bitterly aware that Larry knew nothing of what was

going on as they rode to her apartment. For all he knew he was still in the company of Ginger Doss. But Connie had already written that off as not being Larry's fault. That scheming blonde seemed to have a talent for getting men drunk and forgetful.

The taxi driver obligingly helped her get him out and upstairs when they arrived at her apartment. Larry was amenable when they were alone inside. He stood there, tottering, his eyes shut. Connie led him to the bedroom. His instinct must have told him that he was on a bed when Connie got him seated. For he toppled over at once and his head sought the pillow gratefully. Ten minutes later she had him undressed and under the covers.

Larry opened startled eyes at eleven o'clock the following morning. He was treated to a vision of great loveliness as Connie hovered over him, tickling his nose. Flimsy, black transparency covered her straight shoulders. He blinked in amazement.

"I thought you'd never wake up," she grinned.

He managed a sickly smile as his mind groped for understanding. The last he remembered of last night he had been with Ginger Doss. How in the world had he ended up with Connie?

"Good morning," he said weakly.

She bent over and kissed him.

"Now we're not going to say anything until I get us some breakfast," Connie announced.

This came as a result of Larry's speculative remark about what had happened last night. She went to the kitchen and told him to join her when he had gotten ready. Larry came out a few moments later without bothering yet to don his necktie.

"Here we are. Sit down," said Connie, motioning toward the breakfast nook where she had spread out sweet rolls and butter, together with orange juice and a pot of coffee.

They ate for a couple of minutes in silence then Connie looked across at him with an amused smile on her face, her eyes dancing.

"First thing, I want you to know that I was very much put out

about you last night. And I don't mind telling you that only one thing saved you neck."

"That so," said Larry vaguely. He had come to the conclusion that he'd better not do too much talking. There were too many things about last night that he didn't know.

"If I'd found you with anybody but Ginger Doss, I'd have held you entirely to blame."

"Why, Connie?"

"Because I know that witch put the hex on you. It isn't the first time it's happened. Now tell me, did she barge in on you at Sardi's?"

"Yes," he admitted thoughtfully.

"Just as I thought! She engineered everything. And then last night she asked you to take her to dinner and got you so pickled that you forgot everything else. Isn't that how it happened?"

Connie looked at him as if she needed no confirmation at all. But Larry looked down and didn't say anything for a while.

"Well, am I right?" she asked.

"Partly," he replied slowly.

She looked at him with surprise. Her eyes clouded as it occurred to her that there was something else on Larry's mind.

"What do you mean by that?"

Larry took a sip of coffee. When he faced her at last there was a queer look on his eyes. "It isn't quite fair to say that she got me drunk. I got that way myself."

"That's one way of looking at it, but I know better. That girl is poison. I've seen it happen before. She'll latch on to any man—"

"That's not quite the point, Connie," Larry broke in. He glanced at her uncomfortably. "You see, Ginger didn't call me up and ask me to take her to dinner. I called her."

Connie gazed at him. For a moment the space that separated them was studded with exclamation points. Her eyes narrowed.

"Why did you do that?"

"I'm sorry now that I did it, but at the time I was mad and upset."

"What about?" she asked wonderingly.

"About you."

"I think you'd better explain," she said after a short, confused silence.

"I believed you, Connie, when you said you wanted to go home from Bardia's," he said in an even tone. "I didn't wake up to the sort of girl you really are until Ginger came along and said you had gone to stay with Philip Hatheway."

A hot uncomfortable feeling crawled inside Connie. Her eyes filled with foreboding as she stared at him. She was so stunned by what he said that, for a moment, she could think of nothing.

"Yes—you believed that?" she managed.

"Yes, Connie. It's the truth. That's why." A regretful smile played about his lips and his eyes were filled with disillusionment as he gazed at her unflinchingly.

"What other lies did she tell you?" asked Connie, feeling faint.

"No lies. Let's not try to fool each other any longer, please. Ginger told me all about you. She said it was a known fact that Hatheway's money had put you where you are today. She pointed out to me that I was just a passing fancy and that you'd hang onto your millions regardless of what happened." He ended with bitterness in his voice.

In desperation she pounced on his last statement. "That's not so! You mustn't believe it, Larry. I don't care for Philip like that."

"No. I'm sure it's his money you're interested in."

Connie was horrified at the turn things had taken. She searched frantically for a way out. She begged, "Larry, you've got to listen to reason. It's not the way you think. I love you—love you more than anything else in the world."

"But just the night before last you walked out on me to go to another man."

Connie's anguished eyes fell. "You don't understand. Not at all."

"I don't guess there's any particular harm done," he mused a few moments later. "My only trouble was, I had begun to take you seriously."

"Larry, please! For God's sake don't talk like that," she pleaded.

"Sorry, Connie, but that's how I feel."

He dropped the stub of a cigarette into his coffee cup and arose. She followed him into the living room.

"We've got so much to look forward to together," said Connie.

"The ballet and the music you wrote for it and—"

"Look. Let's just forget the whole thing. It's been fun but—"

"No! I won't!" Her voice carried a note of hysteria. "I want you to know how wrong you've been. I'm going to prove it, Larry. I'll prove how much I love you."

He gazed down at her, a half smile on his face. Then he shrugged and went on into the next room to get his necktie and coat. Connie stood in the middle of her living room, her nerves on edge. She actually wrung her hands in despair as she tried to figure out how to handle this catastrophe.

The buzzer at the door distracted her for a moment. Almost mechanically she went to open it, knowing it must be Yvonne. But it wasn't. It was Philip.

"Hello, my dear," he said eagerly as he entered the room. All at once he stopped short. He stared as Larry Brooks emerged from Connie's bedroom.

"Fancy meeting you here," said Larry smiling.

He glanced at Connie wryly. This certainly confirmed in his mind everything he had heard. Casually he walked to the door and closed it quietly behind him as he disappeared into the hall.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Philip, recovering from his astonishment.

All at once Connie's anxiety, her frustration and her fury came to a climax. She lost control as her eyes searched the room. They fell on a small porcelain figurine that sat on a nearby table. She grabbed it up and sailed it across the room in the direction of Philip's head. He ducked just in time.

"Get out!" she screamed. "You hear me? Get out!"

He beat a hasty retreat.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

PHILIP'S fear and alarm gave way to extreme agitation when he reached the comparative safety of the street level. He hastened out to the curb, only to remember that he had sent

his conscience off, having anticipated a couple of pleasant hours with Connie. If that were all that had gone wrong with his plans he might not now be in such a hurry.

It was bad enough that Connie, for reasons unknown, had turned on him like a trapped wildcat and used his head as a target at which to throw things. It was even worse that, in a moment of frenzy, she had ordered him out of the apartment he was paying for. But the crowning blow—the event that rocked Philip back on his heels—was the presence in her room of that Third Avenue piano player.

He had made provisions against such a thing, so he had thought. He had entered into a bargain in utter good faith, pledging certain commitments for the guarantee that the piano player would be removed as a threat to his happiness. Ginger Doss had betrayed him and Philip was out for blood.

He got in a taxi and rode to the mid-town hotel where Ginger and Rob Walker were known to be registered. At the house phone in the lobby he got connected with Walker's suite and announced to the startled salesman that he was coming right up. His agitation mounted as he went up in the elevator.

"Hello, Philip," Walker greeted him cordially when he entered.

"Don't 'hello' Philip' me!" he cried angrily. "Where's Ginger?"

Walker hurried to a door that led from the small living room of the suite. He knocked. "Ginger, Philip is here and wants to see you."

The blonde came out smiling a moment later and fastening a thin dressing gown about her waist. She spoke to Philip gaily and asked him how things had been going.

"That's what I came here to find out!" Philip thundered. "Did you explain things to Robbin yet?"

"Yea, I told him the deal we'd made."

"It appears that I made a deal. Not you," Philip said, accusingly. "I promised you I'd give Robbin that contract if you'd abscond that piano player's affection for Constance."

"Brother, if it wasn't alienated last night, then I was cock-eyed," Ginger laughed.

Philip favored her with a blistering look. "Then what was he doing in Connie's room less than half an hour ago?"

"He couldn't have been!" Ginger stared, the smile vanishing from her lips.

"He most certainly could. I saw him with my own eyes!"

"But he was hopelessly out on his feet by the time I got him back to O'Brien's last night. I even stayed until O'Brien and the bartender took him upstairs and put him to bed. I saw them take him upstairs."

"Maybe he got up and went over to Connie's this morning," Robbin suggested.

Philip thought about that a moment then shook his head. "He looked at me like a man who had spent the night there. The deal I made with Ginger was that they were to be kept apart. And within twenty-four hours I had them together again. To hell with a contract for you!"

"Oh, now, wait a minute, Philip," cried Robbin in alarm. "Maybe something went wrong that was beyond Ginger's control. Please, let me assure you, we'll do everything in our power. We'll leave no stone unturned—"

"Hey, wait a minute," said Ginger thinking hard. "There's just one possibility. One thing that could have happened, if I'm remembering correctly."

Both men looked at her and she went on.

"Connie was in O'Brien's when Larry and I got there."

This information was a low blow to Philip. He took a step backward. Connie had told him that she was going to rest last night. She had denied him the privilege of taking her to dinner on the grounds that she wanted to spend the evening at home. What had she been doing at O'Brien's? Philip was meeting with treachery at every turn.

"It could be, though I can't quite see how," Ginger speculated. "We might have gotten him out of bed and taken him home with her."

"Could be," Robbin agreed.

Philip sank into a chair and asked for a glass of water. Robbin poured him a good stiff drink of whiskey instead. Philip quaffed it in one gulp. The fiery-drink gave him new life as it reached his stomach.

"I'm going to find out where I stand right now!" he declared. "I'm sick and fed up."

He got to his feet and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Robbin.

"I'm going over to Third Avenue."

"Hey, wait. We'd better come along," cried Ginger excitedly.

This offer of support, morale and otherwise, was not unwelcome to Philip. He waited for Ginger to hurry into some street clothes, his jaw resolute.

Twenty minutes later the three of them got out of a taxi in front of O'Brien's saloon. They entered with Philip leading the way. If he got into a fight with Larry Brooks they'd be there to back him up.

"Where's the piano player?" asked Philip of Sam, the bartender.

"He don't come on until night, mister."

"Doesn't he live around here somewhere?"

"Sure. Right upstairs." Sam gave them the room number and told them to go right on in.

A moment later, with Philip still in the lead, the three of them filed up the narrow stairway. Philip's nose shrank from the cheapness of the place but he marched resolutely on. They paused in front of Larry's door. Philip gave a sharp knock then pushed the door open.

It was a toss-up as to where the most surprise was registered. Whether it was by the two occupants of the room or by the three who stood in the doorway. Larry was stretched out on the divan and Jane Vollmer sat beside him soothingly rubbing his head. They stared at the three intruders. It was on the tip of Philip's tongue to apologize and withdraw, when Larry sat up.

"Pardon my appearance, folks," he smiled, "but come on in and make yourselves at home."

"I—uh—we didn't mean to butt in," Philip stammered, glancing uncomfortably at Jane.

"Oh never mind," said the waitress sarcastically, "it's getting to be an everyday occurrence."

Larry got up and put on his things. Since there were only two worn chairs in the room he offered them to the girls. The three men, he suggested, could all sit on the divan. No one, however, accepted his offer.

"To what do we owe the visit of such a distinguished committee?" Larry asked.

"Just what were you doing in Miss Carter's apartment this morning?" asked Philip, taking the bait by the horns.

Larry smiled and wagged his head in dismay. "I was just telling Jane about that. Damndest thing I ever had happen. I couldn't have been more surprised if I'd awakened on top of the United Nations Building."

"You were there all night then," said Philip. When Larry nodded Philip tossed Ginger a look of disgust.

"You couldn't have been there all night, Larry," Ginger said hastily. "I brought you to O'Brien's early this morning."

Jane verified that and added, "And the last anybody saw of him was right here in this bed. I asked O'Brien and Sam both about it this morning. They swear they put him here."

"Then Connie must have gotten you out of here," cried Ginger in triumph.

"Sure she did!" Jane exclaimed. "It's the only way it could have happened. And if she comes around here any more—believe me—I'll fix her clock."

They all looked at Philip who had sagged appreciably. Then it was all true. Connie was bent on having Larry Brooks in her stead. His pursuit of the glamorous dancer was coming to a scorching end.

"I guess that's all we came to find out," He glanced at Larry. "You're to be congratulated. I only hope you are better able to understand her than I."

"Huh?" said Larry. "Come again."

"Connie. I hope you'll make her happy," said Philip dismally.

"Look here, fellow," said Larry grinning, "if you think I'm going to take over your job, you're nuts. She's too much for me. From now on I gotta be content with Jane."

"Why—I! You big bum!" Jane protested, but her eyes were smiling.

"What?" Philip exclaimed. "You mean, you're through with Connie?" His hopes soared.

"That's putting it a little backwards. I never went out for her

in the first place. This whole mess would never have happened if she hadn't asked me to write the music for her new ballet."

Philip thought hard. Suddenly his eyes lit up and he slapped Larry on the back. "By George! I believe you! And you did a fine job on that mess too. I'm going to see to it that the Ballet de Roi Association provides you with suitable compensation."

"How about compensating me too, Mr. Hathaway?" Jane spoke up brightly. "You don't know what I've had to put up with around here for the sake of that damned music."

Philip glanced at the waitress. For the first time he noticed what a very attractive redhead she was. His eyes averted happily.

"I'll take one of you, my dear. If I ever come to O'Brien's for dinner again, I want you to wait on me personally."

"I'd love to," Jane assured him.

"Let's go, folks," cried Philip happily.

When they were out of the room, Larry and Jane grinned at each other.

"Will you tell me," he asked, "just what brought them here? I never did get the straight of that."

"The way I got it, Hathaway thought you were running off with his lady love, the premiere danseuse."

"And I might have, too, if I hadn't come to my senses just in the past day or two." Larry looked a little sad as he spoke. "But she's too rich for my pocket. No, it would never do."

"Listen to me, Bonnie. I'm fed up with that header at this point. If you expect any more favors from me, don't mention her name again in my presence!"

Larry removed his things and stretched out once more with a sigh. His head still hurt from the liquor he had consumed the night before. Jane sat down beside him and once more began soothing his aching temples with her fingers.

"You're a real comfort, Jane," he said, closing his eyes.

"You're an unfaithful rat but you're handy to have around. Now, if only you had Philip Hathaway's money..."

Her voice trailed off in Larry's awareness. Restfully he sank into quiet repose. His heart ached a bit as he thought of the glorious Connie and what might have been. But he put that firmly out of his mind and drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CONNIE remained immobilized for four days. True, she went to the theater each night and did her stint, returning alone by taxi right after each performance. Yvonne prepared her meals and served as her only contact with the outside world.

The outside world most anxious to contact her was Philip who solitiously acquired of her through Yvonne by telephone each day, sent bouquets of gladioli, roses and orchids flown in from Hawaii, and, on the fourth day, a diamond clip which set him back twelve hundred dollars.

Yvonne's eyes danced with admiration when they opened it, but Connie didn't even give it a second glance. She was no longer interested in material things. But she did feel that she should thank him in person for the offering and did so the next time he called.

"I've been awfully worried about you, my dear," he said, after receiving her acknowledgment of the clip.

"I'm all right."

"But this business of staying at home alone isn't good for you, Connie. Can't we have dinner tonight after the show?"

"I guess so," she sighed, somewhat to her own surprise.

She let Philip take her to dinner three evenings in a row. The places he took her and the food she ate were meaningless appendages to the dismal necessities of life. She even let him make love to her one night in her apartment because she was tired of dreaming up excuses.

That convinced Philip that his victory was won and his theory might have been proven correct had not a minor incident occurred which brought Connie into the crucial stage of her recovery from the love bug's bite.

Right after Larry's recital, Hoke, the director of the Ballet de Roi, had started work on the ragtime number. This had been according to Connie's instructions. He now found it necessary to make some revisions in the original choreography and music. Hoke was innocently unaware of recent emotional upheavals and failed to mention to either Connie or Larry that the presence of both were required at a confab.

He asked Connie to show up at the theater at three o'clock



one afternoon. When she said she could make it, he called Larry and requested the same favor from him. Larry, after showing some surprise that anything had been done toward setting a ballet to his music, obligingly agreed to come.

Two men were on stage, one seated at the piano, when Connie walked down the deserted aisle. She knew one of them was Hoke. It didn't even occur to her who the other might be. She mounted to the stage, her brooding eyes lowered, then froze in her tracks when she looked up.

"Hello, Connie," said Larry, getting up from the piano stool. A friendly smile was on his face and a genuine regard filled his eyes. Connie stared at him. She couldn't seem to take her eyes away from his deeply remembered face, his broad shoulders, his slender, wiry build. Her mouth went suddenly dry and she could hardly make her tongue work.

"I—I didn't know you were coming," she managed and her words seemed, even to herself, as if they came from someone else.

"Sure," put in Hoke, bustling around, "we've got to have him change the music in a few places. Do you want to get into a practice costume, Miss Carter, or don't you want to bother?"

"Maybe I'd better." She seized upon the suggestion to get away for a few minutes. She needed to recover from this unexpected encounter. She hastened to her dressing room.

Inside, Connie sunk weakly to the bench in front of her dressing table. Her legs felt numb and her head actually felt as if there were nothing in it at all. Her breath came in short quick gasps. Grimly she got control of herself.

So this was how it was, she thought. This was how it was going to be. In that very second the die was cast as to which way she would go. Connie knew, with complete and utter certainty, that she could not go through life carrying the torch for Larry Brooks. She couldn't stand it. Somehow she had to make him hate, regardless of the cost. What it would amount to she did not yet know but from this moment on she'd start finding out.

Connie arose. A new smile resolved itself on her face. A firm determination filled her eyes. Quickly she undressed and got into a black leotard. She strapped on a pair of black ballet slippers and went out to join the two men on stage.

She was well aware of Larry's eyes upon her, admiring her

full breasts under the jersey and her sturdy but exquisitely shaped, bare legs.

"I didn't know you'd decided to go ahead with this thing," Larry told her.

"I'd do anything for your sake, Larry," she replied with deep sincerity. "That's the one thing you failed to consider last week."

There was skepticism and confusion in his eyes as he sat down at the piano. But neither he nor Connie had further time to give to their own thoughts for Hoke got busy at once.

They spent two hours making revisions. Connie proved her professional ability by putting aside all personal considerations and concentrating on the task at hand. Against the stark background of the bare, unlit stage, she executed intricate dance steps to Larry's music. Even without benefit of lights and make-up she was fascinating. Her daintiness, her beauty, her grace were without rival on Broadway.

"That ought to do it, kids," said Hoke, satisfied at last. Larry turned around on the piano stool and smiled. "Maybe it does for you, but I've got a good three days' work ahead of me, getting this music revised."

"When do you think we can get into rehearsal with us?" Connie asked.

"Next week," Hoke speculated as he got into his coat. "I've got to hurry along. Got a heavy date at five-thirty."

A moment later he walked up an aisle and disappeared into the shadows in the rear of the theater. Larry offered Connie a cigarette. After it was lit she strolled a chair and rested her arms on its back.

"Don't let me keep you, Larry," she smiled.

"How can I help it?" he asked, admiring the piquant picture she made. "And speaking of dates—I guess you're busy tonight?"

"Not necessarily."

"Could I buy you a drink in celebration of the ruse O'Brien gave me today?"

"Larry!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Congratulations!"

"It's not much by your standards but a whale of a lot for me. O'Brien is doing a thriving business all of a sudden."

"I don't care what it is, I'm happy for you, Larry. Of course I'll have a drink with you. Two, if you'll ask me."

He stood up and walked over to her, an amused smile on his lips. "Won't Philip get angry?"

"Maybe he will, but I don't care."

Their eyes met. Connie's clear, dark gaze was yearning with tenderness, speaking her love more clearly than words. Larry's were bright and bewitched at first. Then slowly he sobered at the radiant light glowing in her eyes. He glanced away in confusion.

"I've never met a girl like you before. I guess that's why I don't understand you."

"I'm no different from any other girl."

"Then how can you look like that at me when you belong to someone else?" he asked in despair.

"I don't belong to anyone else, Larry," she said quietly, "and I'm going to prove that to you."

"Why should you want to? That's something else I don't understand."

"Geez." A gentle smile crossed her mouth.

Larry threw up his hands. "If we're going to have a drink—"

"I'll get dressed right away," said Connie getting off the chair. She started across the stage. Halfway to the other side she stopped and glanced over her shoulder. "Well, are you coming?"

Larry was at a loss. He followed her helplessly to her dressing room, knowing that her charms were about to get the best of him. She was simply irresistible. He couldn't afford to fall in love with her, yet how could it be avoided if this sort of thing continued?

"Mind?" she asked, turning her back to him.

He looked at the zipper down the back of her leotard. Larry took the small metal clasp between his thumb and forefinger and pulled the zipper down. That did it.

He turned towards her and crushed her lips with his. Connie's feelings were unleashed at last. She pressed against him with hurricane force. For a long moment they stood there glued together, their lips smothered.

Carried away by the tenderness of the moment he caressed her and murmured his endearments.

"But look," he said finally, "we can't stay here forever, much as I'd like to."

"I'm ready for a cocktail myself," she giggled.

Larry rose and went over to his coat for a cigarette. Connie

sat up on the studio couch. A sly grin lighted her face. He couldn't very well deny this first step in her campaign to convince him of her love. Larry sat watching her intently as she arose and dressed.

"What time do you have to be back at the theater?" he asked.

"We're closed tonight."

"Fine! Then let's not only have cocktails but dinner too."

"I'd love it, Larry."

Darkness had already descended on the city as they stepped out onto the street. A brisk wind scurried through the canyons of steel and masonry urging human beings to step lively. They made their way through the crowds of Times Square to a small restaurant on Forty-fourth Street.

"Does this suit you?" Larry asked suddenly when they were seated at a small, secluded table.

"Of course," Connie smiled.

"I know you're more accustomed to the razzle-dazzle places but even with the rain I got I've got to be a little conservative."

"Quit apologizing. I like this place. I told you once before that I've eaten at every hamburger joint within half a mile of Broadway."

"I'd forgotten that, Connie," he said and turned with a smile to the menu.

They had three cocktails and followed it with an appetizing dinner. Afterward they smoked and sipped their coffee, discussing the changes Larry was to make in his music. Without thinking or considering possible consequences he ordered two after-dinner drinks.

"Holy smokes! Larry exclaimed, glancing at his watch at nine o'clock. "I'm due over at O'Brien's. Can I take you somewhere from here?"

"Nope," she shrugged.

"You mean you haven't a date or something?" he asked as he handed their waiter a ten dollar bill.

Connie smiled and shook her head.

"Why don't you come over to O'Brien's with me?"

She glanced at him coquettishly. "Don't mind if I do."

Twenty minutes later they arrived at the saloon. They hurried in. O'Brien was delighted to have the famous dancer among his guests for the evening. He provided her with a table close to Larry's piano and set her up to a bottle of champagne.

Connie noticed the improvement in O'Brien's business. The place was full this evening and several of the tables were occupied by people of obvious means. Her presence caused a stir of excitement at nearby tables and twice she graciously provided her autograph. While Larry was playing, a columnist by the name of Quinlan sat at her table for a while during an interview.

"How'd you ever discover this place, Miss Carter?"

She motioned towards Larry. "You probably read where he's doing the music for a new ballet."

"Yes. And he's very good. At this rate, O'Brien will have to enlarge his place to accommodate everyone who wants to hear him play."

"I don't imagine Larry will play here too much longer. There are bigger things in store for him than this."

"Can I quote you on that?"

She grinned and shook her head. "Don't make O'Brien mad at me. He's paying for those drinks."

Regardless of whence they came they were having an exhilarating effect on Connie. She laughed and joked with Quinlan, visted with several others who stopped at her table. She sent O'Brien off for more champagne and when he returned he said several customers were wondering if she'd oblige them with a dance.

"Of course I will," cried Connie in great, good spirits.

She had Larry play some of the ballet music and startled everyone in the saloon with ten minutes of impromptu entertainment. The walls reverberated with the roar of applause that followed. She made just as big a hit on Third Avenue as she had in the Ballet du Roi.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" cried O'Brien gratefully.

"Hold your horses, chief," Connie laughed as she resumed her seat at the table. "Give Larry and me a couple of more drinks, then we'll really put on a show!"

By midnight O'Brien's had turned into one big party. Everybody had fun. Everybody enjoyed Connie as she did her stuff unfiringly to an appreciative an audience as she had ever had. Everybody was in a festive mood except one.

Jane Vollmer had watched the entire evening with more than a little resentment. The customers were generous with their tips still she didn't like it one bit that Constance Carter was making herself the belle of the ball. By one o'clock she had had

all she could put up with. She slipped into a phone booth and got in touch with Philip Hathaway.

"This is Jane Vollmer, over at O'Brien's."

"Oh yes!" came Philip's voice in agreeable surprise.

"Listen. You seem to have a hanging for Constance Carter and I'm telling you this as a friend. You'd better get over here to the saloon right away."

"Why?" asked Philip in astonishment.

"Because your girl friend seems bent on making O'Brien's a second Ballet du Roi."

A short silence followed. Then Philip said, "I'll get over just as fast as I can."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE scene that greeted Philip upon his arrival forty minutes later sent a stab of fear through his body. In O'Brien's there was a carnival. Everyone seemed gloriously lit. It was almost like a New Year's Eve party without the confetti and serpentine. Larry was bent over the keyboard playing as if inspired. But what shocked Philip out of his wits was his very own Connie.

She was no longer the taciturn artist of the past week. She was sitting on the piano, her shken legs crossed, and a champagne glass in her hand. Above the din and the music she was shouting encouragement to six volunteers from the audience who had come onto the dance floor to do a Virginia Reel.

Philip followed his way back to her. "What's going on here?" he demanded, but his words were lost in the noise.

"Hi, Philip!" Connie cried merrily. "Sit down. Have a drink. That's my table right over there."

He made another attempt to get heard but it was useless. His face was dark as he sat down at Connie's table and waited for the dance to end.

A short while later, Larry took an intermission. He helped Connie down from the piano and they both joined Philip whose disposition had not improved any during his wait.

"I think some sort of explanation is due," Philip said grimly. "About what?" she asked.

"About what's going on here, that's what!" Philip snapped.

"Nothing in particular," she told him lightly.

"The devil there isn't. I walk in here and find you sitting on a plane. You—the premiere danseuse of the Ballet de la Roi" Connie gave him an amused look. "What's wrong with sitting on a plane?"

"Plenty!" he said emphatically. "It cheapens you. It makes the ballet look like a farce. It—"

"Oh phooey, Philip," she laughed. "Come down to earth."

"I am down to earth," he said, rapping the table. "I've taken all the nonsense I can stand, Constance. This has got to stop. And it's got to stop immediately!"

The smile faded from her lips. Slowly she lowered her glass and put it on the table. A storm began brewing in her eyes.

"There's nothing to worry about, Mr Hathaway," Larry put in quickly in an effort to keep peace. "Connie and I were over at the theater at Hoke's request this afternoon to do some work on the new ballet. Afterward we had dinner and came over here. The crowd has gotten a little gay, that's all."

"You stay out of this, Brooks," Philip ordered, glaring at him.

"You're getting pretty stuffy, Philip," Connie observed evenly.

He turned his glare on her. "More importantly, from your standpoint I should think, I'm getting fed up."

"And just what do you mean by that?"

"I've put thousands of dollars into the ballet. I'm not going to stand by and watch it turned into a side show, especially in a Third Avenue dump like this."

"There's nothing wrong with Third Avenue and there's nothing wrong with this dump," Connie shot back. "Everybody here tonight is a potential customer of the ballet. They like Larry's music. They seemed to like my dancing earlier in the evening and—"

"What?" he exclaimed. "You performed here in front of—of this drunken crowd."

He stared at her horrified.

"And what if I did?" she asked haughtily.

"Just this," he thundered, when he found words, "I'm not going to tolerate it another minute."

"You've got a nerve telling me what to do," Connie flung back at him, her anger rising.

"Maybe not. But I don't have to put out another damned nickel to finance it," Philip exploded.

Larry stared at the two of them open mouthed. He didn't know what to make of Philip Hathaway's remark. And he was even more astounded by Connie's reply. This had all the earmarks of a momentous event.

"Nobody's asking you to," cried Connie who had not been stopped one second by Philip's declaration. She went on in a rage. "The ballet is making money and it's going to make more. I've got a right to go wherever I want to."

"You can't come here!"

"The hell I can't. And if it's so beneath your dignity just what brought you here tonight?" she asked defiantly.

"Jane Vollmer called me. She said for me to get right over because you were making an ass of yourself!" Philip answered sardonically.

Sparks flew in Connie's eyes at this information. She glanced beyond, toward the crowd at the waitresses who moved through the tables. Jane Vollmer, at that instant, was approaching a nearby table carrying a tray with four steins of beer.

Connie was so beside herself with indignation that she lost control at sight of the waitress. She jumped to her feet before either Philip or Larry could restrain her and raced to Jane.

"Just what do you mean, butting into my business?" she demanded.

Jane was so startled that she came to a sudden halt. The tray tilted and the four steins crashed to the floor. When it came to her what had happened she glared at Connie.

"Look what you made me do!" she cried accusingly.

"Shut up. Answer me," Connie demanded.

Jane wasn't used to such orders, especially from girls, and of all girls, from Connie. She gave her a shove. To Connie that was the final insult, heaped on top of injury. She tore into Jane like a buzz saw.

Both men at the table had arisen before this but it happened so quickly that neither Larry nor Philip reached the girls in time to keep them apart. Actually the fight was started before even those at tables in the immediate vicinity realized what was going on. In a few seconds a whole table of patrons were involved when Jane was thrown back into a lady's lap. Instantly, four men were on their feet.

In a flash O'Brien's turned into a maelstrom. Larry tried frantically to get to the girls but his progress was impeded by hostile males. Someone struck Philip on the back of his head, knocking his glasses to the floor. At least twenty persons were now engaged.

One of the bartenders leaped over the bar to restore order but his action only added to the alarm and confusion. O'Brien shouted hysterically for order but no one paid any attention to him. Men cursed and women screamed.

Sirens wailed in the night as two squad cars and paddy wagon rushed to the scene. It took seven stern policemen a good five minutes to separate all of the combatants and get the place quieted down. Those who could, fled. By the time the police had the situation in hand less than twenty customers remained.

O'Brien's was a shambles and its proprietor stood behind the bar quaking before the grim questioning of two towering officers.

"I don't know what happened," he said, shaking. "Suddenly I looked up and it seemed half my customers were fighting."

"But something had to start it," said one of the officers.

"It sure did!" cried Jane Vollmer. She pointed toward Connie. "She's the one who did it."

The officers followed the direction of her accusing finger. Connie was seated in a chair, weeping hysterically. Larry was bent over her, trying to calm her down. He had a slight cut on his left cheek. Just then Philip picked himself up off the floor. Not knowing that the day was over he glared around beligerently. He turned pale the next instant at the sight of the police.

Several persons started talking at once but one of the officers roared for quiet; He'd do the talking, he announced. During the next ten minutes the officers quizzed everyone present as to what had transpired. Ultimately, for lack of evidence, they dismissed everyone from the saloon except Connie, Jane, Larry, Philip, O'Brien, Sam the bartender and three disheveled customers who had participated in the fight without knowing why.

"Okay, all of you outside. We'll finish up at the district station," an officer announced.

The prospect of being hauled into court terrified Philip. "Oh, wait a minute officer," he cried. "We can't have this."

"We can't have people like you disturbing the peace either,"

said the officer laconically. "Furthermore, I'd say the owner of this joint has every right to collect damages from you and the others who tore it up."

Philip groaned. "This has all been a mistake, officer. I swear it has. I'll pay for the damages. Every penny. Only don't haul a bunch of innocent people to jail."

"There's nothing innocent about her!" cried Jane, glaring at Connie.

"Who was it stuck her nose in something that was none of her business?" Connie shouted back. "You started it. Not me!"

"Quiet, quiet," the officer demanded. "We'll settle nothing here. Outside all of you. And step lively."

No one said anything during the ride to the district station. They all filed in before a startled desk sergeant who took down names and addresses. Philip demanded permission to call his attorney and the sergeant, after a second glance at his address, gave in. They all fell to wrangling and nothing was accomplished for several minutes. No one noticed the arrival of a newspaper reporter who recognized the famous Connie Carter and immediately got interested in what was going on.

As for Connie she sank into a chair and stared dizzily into space. Nothing seemed to work out right for her. Everytime she thought happiness was just about in her grasp a cruel turn of fate snatched it from her possession. She was particularly hurt over Larry's concern for a small trouble over one of Jane Vollmer's eyes.

Philip and O'Brien were standing to one side talking earnestly. The three customers involved decided that they were mad at nobody. Sam the bartender, it turned out was acquainted with the sergeant and was doing some fast talking.

The arrival of Philip's attorney, twenty minutes later, brought matters to a head. He quickly learned that O'Brien, nor anyone else, was prepared to file charges against his client and demanded to know upon what grounds he was being detained.

"Why, him and his friends started a small riot over on Third Avenue," one of the officers spoke up.

"Very well, if those are the charges I'm prepared to post immediate bail," the attorney replied.

Inclining to rot was a serious charge and Sam's friend, the sergeant, couldn't see it. The newspaper reporter went from one to the other trying to figure out the angle. He had a story—he was sure of that because of the presence of such big names as Connie Carter and Hathaway—but he couldn't figure out what it was. In the end they were all hooked on a technical charge of disturbing the peace and dismissed.

"I'll be in your office first thing in the morning, Mr. Hathaway," the attorney promised when they were out on the street. "We'll get this whole thing straightened out in no time."

"What about the thing we were talking about?" O'Brien asked Philip.

"You be in the office too. We'll settle everything in the morning," Philip replied. He turned to Connie. "I'll take you home now."

"I don't know that I want to go there," she said stubbornly.

Everyone looked at her. The newspaper reporter having followed them outside, listened closely.

"But where on earth would you go at this hour, and after all that has happened?" asked Philip, bewildered.

Connie glanced toward Larry. His sudden embarrassment was not fully revealed in the semi-darkness. He gave a soft cough.

"You'd better go on home, Connie. Get a good night's rest," he advised.

"But, where are you going?" she asked.

"Home. That's where we all belong."

Connie saw the glint of triumph in Jane Volmer's eyes. That stung. Just then a taxi pulled up and Philip took her arm. She didn't move.

"Go on, Connie. It's best," Larry pleaded.

Bitterly she got into the taxi. Philip and the attorney got in beside her. As the cab pulled away from the curb the last thing she saw was Larry, Jane and O'Brien standing together watching them. Once again tears of frustration filled her eyes.

She refused to speak to the two men in the taxi with her all the way home.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CONNIE flung the morning paper aside as she sat in bed. Woe filled her eyes. This time everything. This was just fine! She grabbed it up again and looked at it with anger and dismay. One of her publicity pictures was prominently displayed in a two column cut. Under it was a highly erroneous but very sensational story of what had happened last night.

The account implied that she had engaged in a barroom brawl with a waitress over the attention of the millhouse socialite, Philip Hathaway, President of the Hathaway Lark and Bolt Company of New England and patron of the arts. It said further that Larry Brooks, the concert pianist, had participated with Hathaway in the seductions, apparently over Miss Carter. The riot squad had rushed to O'Brien's Tavern, where the incident occurred and all principals had been charged with disturbance of the peace.

"Yvonne," Connie cried. "Come here."

The maid appeared a moment later. "You called, mademoiselle?"

"What else? Has there been any calls on—?"

"Newspapers have been calling constantly all morning. I've told them all you are not available," Yvonne replied.

"Did Mr. Brooks call?"

"No, but Mr. Hathaway did."

"I'm not up to anyone but Mr. Brooks, Yvonne," she said as she sat down in the kitchen to some tomato juice, toast and coffee.

"What if Mr. Hathaway calls again?"

"Tell him I'm not in. Tell him I went to South Africa," Connie replied moodily.

She was fully clothed and pacing the floor of the living room at a quarter to six when the buzzer sounded. She watched, hopeful that it might be Larry, as Yvonne went to answer it. Her hopes were dashed a second late when Philip marched in. "Glad I caught you before you left for the theater," he said in a somber tone. Without being asked, he removed his hat and coat.

Connie remained silent as he came over and sat down.

"There are a number of things that we must talk about, Connie," he began. "First, I want to report that my attorney has succeeded in getting all charges against us dismissed."

"I figured he would."

"Secondly," Philip went on, "have you talked to any newspaper men today?"

"No. I haven't talked to anyone."

"For once you showed good judgment," Philip commented and Connie glanced at him sharply. "Needless to say, the publicity was most unfortunate. It's embarrassed me tremendously all over town."

"I didn't ask you to come to O'Brien's last night. Don't forget that!" she cracked.

"That's true, but you sure made me sorry I had."

"Then don't go blaming me."

"The blame goes much deeper," he said, gazing at her evenly. "I've suspected for some time that you've been interested in that piano player. I can tolerate no more of such monkey business."

Connie eyed him carefully. "Look here, Philip. If you think you can control me every hour of the day, you've got another thing coming."

"That might be, but there is also a limit as to how far I'll go in sharing you with anyone. The affair last night has already created a storm in the Association. That old battle-ax, Mrs. Switzer, got in touch with me today and said she was pulling out. Several others are going with her. I'm now holding the bag for just about the whole investment in the Ballet du Bol."

"Then you'll get most of the profit."

"There won't be any profit if patrons of the ballet get the idea its premiere dancer is nothing but a gutter snipe."

Connie's eyes were narrowed but she said nothing. Philip had something there and she knew it.

"So I've taken some drastic steps today to see to it that nothing of the sort occurs. I'm fed up with that ragtime fellow."

"What's he got to do with it? He composed the music to the new ballet. He'll make us all more money."

"And more trouble, I'm afraid, if I'd let things go on as they were."

"What have you done?" she asked, fear jostling her suspicion.

"As you know I agreed to pay for the damages suffered by O'Brien last night. He came to the office this morning and after presenting an estimate, my attorney suggested that I'd be better off just buying the place."

Connie stared at him in amazement. "You did that?"

"Yes," Philip nodded. "I am now the owner of O'Brien's saloon and I have hired him to run it for me, at least temporarily."

"What's that got to do with Larry?" she asked, growing suddenly nervous.

"I told O'Brien to fire him," said Philip with a half smile on his lips. "Effective this date, Mr. Brooks is unemployed as far as I'm concerned."

"You're not being fair with him, Philip," she said, trying desperately for the right words.

He shrugged. "The fellow means absolutely nothing to me. He's been only a source of irritation. Good riddance, I'd say."

"But—" she pleaded, "don't you see? He had nothing to do with it. If all this was anybody's fault it was mine."

"I thought you'd get around to admitting that sooner or later, my dear," Philip smiled. "And that belongs me to the next thing I wanted to discuss with you."

"Wait a minute. You can't do this. You simply can't, Philip. Larry needs his job. He oughtn't to suffer," Connie begged.

"He'll get work in some other honky-tonk. If he doesn't—" Philip shrugged. "What difference does it make. He's only a piano player."

"Only a piano player!" she retorted hotly. All at once she felt anger welling within her. She had to keep control now at all costs.

"Tell you what," said Philip reconsidering. He eyed her thoughtfully. "It just occurred to me that I might be willing to get him back on the job. On one condition, however."

"What?"

"That you agree never to see him again."

They looked at each other. A smug smile was on Philip's lips. Connie was desperate, cornered.

"That's impossible. We're going to have to see each other as we work out the new ragtime ballet," she said, grasping at any thing with which to fight back.

Philip shook his head. "There's not going to be any."  
 "Oh yes there is!" she cried, flying into a rage. "I happen to have something to say about that!"

"You've got nothing to say about the Ballet du Roi. When it comes right down to it, Connie, it's my money."

"I'll quit," she screamed. "I'll quit this very minute if that new ballet is not scheduled."

Philip gave a start. He looked up at her with surprise and incredulity on his face. It was plain that he didn't know whether to believe her or not. She must be bluffing. Had to be. But he feared to call her hand at the moment. Connie was in such a state that she might—just might—do anything.

"The original point was, whether or not you'd see Brooks again," said Philip in an effort to divert her.

"I told you that was impossible if we're to put on the new ballet."

"Then I'll tell you what," Philip smiled generously. "Let's say you won't see him, uh, shall we say in a social way?"

"I'll promise nothing," she said, after glaring at him a moment through the storm that raged in her eyes.

"Better think it over, my dear."

"You think you can buy everything with your filthy money, don't you, Philip?" Her statement fairly dripped with sarcasm and venom.

"You're upset, Connie. I don't want you to make up your mind now. Calm down, then think it all over carefully." Philip arose and prepared to go.

"My mind is made up."

"Come now. I know you're quite nervous over all that's happened. You need some rest. I'd even suggest you don't go on tonight. Call Hoke and have him put one of your understudies as your part."

"That's exactly what I intend doing," said Connie, "because I'm through."

"Now look here," he said with concern. "You're not being sensible at all. Have you stopped to think about Brooks' attitude? Maybe you won't look so good, if you're not in a position to help him. It's something to think about."

"I'm through! Do you hear me?" she cried suddenly.

Philip stared at her. He couldn't believe it. The best thing he could do was to get out. Connie needed to cool off. She couldn't mean what she had said. Knowing her as he did, he'd bet his last knicker on it.

"Call me if you change your mind," said Philip and left.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"OH, Mademoiselle, what have you done?" exclaimed the frightened Yvonne.

"I've declared my independence."

"But Mr. Hathaway might kick you out of the ballet. He might kick us out of this apartment."

"The apartment, perhaps. The ballet, never. He knows it's through my efforts alone that the Association is finally beginning to make money."

"You just told him that you were through, though," Yvonne observed worriedly.

"I want him to stew about that for a while. It will do him good. He's too fond of a dollar to let the ballet fail at this point. He'll be singing a different tune after he thinks it over for a while."

"I only hope you're right, mademoiselle," said Yvonne unconvinced.

"Call Hoke for me please and tell him to put an understudy in my part tonight. I'm going out. I don't know when I'll be back."

"Oh, mademoiselle."

A few minutes later Connie left the apartment. She had waited as long as she could to hear from Larry. Now, he was going to hear from her. She took a taxi to O'Brien's and went up to Larry's room.

A wild argument was in progress between Larry and Jane Vollmer. It ended abruptly when Connie burst in. Fearing more trouble Larry got between the two girls at once.

"There's not going to be another fight. I'm warning you both," he said, glancing at them warily.

"You've got a nerve coming here," Jane told Connie angrily.



Connie eyed the girl disdainfully. "I'm not the least bit concerned with your opinion."

Jane had on her coat, obviously prepared to go out. She started toward the door but Larry stopped her.

"Please, Jane, for the last time. I don't want the damned job."

"Just the same, I'm not going to let them get away with it." At that remark she glared at Connie. "You and your friends!"

The next moment Jane was gone. Larry looked at an imaginary obstacle on the floor, thrust his hands deeply into his trouser pockets and stared gloomily at the far wall.

"What's she up to?" Connie asked.

"Oh, she's got the idea that she's going to see Hathaway and make him take me back as piano player in O'Brien's. She's crazy because I don't want the job. I'm glad he had me fired."

"You know then that he bought the place?"

"Naturally." There was an aloofness in his tone that Connie didn't like.

"I'm awfully sorry for all the trouble I've gotten you in, Larry," she said penitently.

"Don't worry about it."

"I've come here to try and straighten things out."

He gave her a harassed glance. "I'd be in a lot less trouble if people would stop trying to help me."

"If you didn't mean so much to me, Larry, I wouldn't be here."

"Look, Connie. You're wonderful. In spite of what happened last night. In spite of everything. I think you're the most remarkable girl I've ever met. But you live in a different world. I can't possibly—"

"I don't live in a different world any longer. I'm through with all of that," she said quietly.

"What do you mean?" he asked, alarmed.

"I've told Philip Hathaway that I'm through. Less than an hour ago I notified him that it was all washed up between us. Does that prove anything?"

"But you're still the great Constance Carter, the darling of New York, the most famous dancer on Broadway."

Connie smiled. "I'm not sure but that I'm even out of that. Philip got rather difficult. When he tried to force me to his will I told him I was through with the ballet."

"My God!" Larry cried. "You can't give up all of that for me."

"Can't I?"

Larry ran his hands through his hair and began pacing the floor. Connie sank to the edge of the bed. Her large, disturbed eyes followed him as he moved back and forth. A disquieting thought pushed itself to the forefront of her mind.

"I love you, Larry," she said presently. "I had hoped my actions would prove that."

He stopped and looked at her. A forlorn expression was on her face as she sat there, one knee mounted upon the other. To him she was the most beautiful girl in the world, but also the most astounding.

"You sure must if you're willing to give up everything," he said in bewilderment.

"Well then—" She hesitated but Larry only looked at her. Finally she came right out with it because she had to know. It was now or never. "Don't you love me in return?"

Slowly he came to her. He sat beside her, his eyes caressing her face. "How could I help loving you? You're everything a man could desire, Connie. You're love itself." His eyes searched hers. "But I'm not the guy for you. I'm just a nobody. I could never make you happy."

"The point is, don't you think I could make you happy," she remarked, feeling a stab in her heart.

"You could, you could! But—"

"That's all the happiness I'm seeking."

She yearned toward him. Larry felt a bit dizzy from her powerful, magnetic nearness. With a little cry of despair he gathered her into his arms. For a moment he knew anguish for he could see no way for them ever to be equal. Then, as in the past, he put the thought aside and accepted with gratitude the love that she offered.

This was the happiness she wanted. This was all that mattered. She'd sacrifice everything in the world if she could have Larry like this always. All else paled before the shining glory of their love.

"I love you!" he cried. "Love you with all my heart."

Connie sighed with supreme happiness. She would dedicate her life, spend the rest of her days giving him happiness and love. That would be her mission from this moment on.

"Larry. I'm yours forever," she gasped.

As they returned to the mundane world a long time after,

neither had much to say at first. It was as if a great storm had swept their minds and emotions, leaving them clear and refreshed and contented. They knew without discussing it that their love was secured at last.

Just what it would lead to or how it would work out, Larry Brooks hadn't the faintest idea. Neither did Connie, for that matter, but she was certainly too happy to worry about it as they prepared to go out to dinner.

"There's an inexpensive little restaurant up the street in the next block," he suggested. "I'm sorry, Connie, but my funds are limited and now that I'm unemployed—"

"Forget it," she said lightly. "Any place you take me to will be all right."

"But it certainly isn't fancy."

Connie smiled at him fondly. "That doesn't bother me. Quit worrying about money."

Larry wished he could. He wished he had Connie's grand disregard for it. The difference was that she had known success and had blind confidence in its continuation. Larry had neither but he was tired, now, of considering it. He had fought this thing long enough. He began to feel light hearted, as she did, when they left his room. In a manner he felt as if he were abandoning himself to fate and it would be interesting to see what came of it.

His fate, if it were to be linked with Connie's, was undergoing some deliberations at that very moment in Philip Hathaway's apartment. Jane Vollmer had been there thirty minutes and had broken the news to Philip that his beloved Miss Carter was quite possibly at this very moment still in Larry Brooks' room. Philip paced the floor pondering a mighty decision.

"You'd be wise to shake loose of that girl," Jane advised.

"But I can't believe she knows what she's doing," he argued, more with himself than with Jane.

Jane Vollmer sipped the whiskey Barkins had served. "Don't kid yourself. She knows what she's doing as far as you are concerned. What if she did get tired of Larry. She'd find someone else but it wouldn't be you."

"Not if I withdraw my support. She'd be out on the street the minute I did it."

"Then what are you waiting for? You held the whip hand,

Philip. Give her the ax now. That will bring her around whimpering if anything will."

Philip, because he was one, looked like a man about to change the course of his life. He stood on the brink, wanting to jump, but fearing how he might land.

"One other thing," Jane remarked at that critical moment. "She's not the only girl in the world."

Her words aroused visions in Philip's mind. Yes, there had been many before he met Connie. Betty, Maxine, Ruth and Louise, to name a few. There would be others no doubt; already had been for that matter. Ginger, for example. And—he glanced at Jane. She gave him a slow smile.

"Damn it, you're right!" announced Philip.

"Aha, boy!" Jane applauded.

The momentous decision having been made at last, Philip felt the need for action. He needed to hand down decrees, issue orders, set the wheels in motion that would grind Connie down to her dimpled knees. By golly he'd fix her clock this time for sure!

"Hello," he said authoritatively when he was connected with the theater by phone a minute later. "Let me talk to Hoke."

Hoke got on the other end a moment later. "Yes?"

"This is Hathaway. Is Miss Carter on tonight?"

"No. She had her maid call and say she was taking the evening off. I've got her understudy on in her place."

"Good. Keep her there. And tonight after the show is over hand down Miss Carter's name from the marquee. Put the other girl's up in her place, understand?"

"Why—" asked the astounded Hoke.

"Just do as I say," Philip ordered. "And tomorrow have new playbills printed. Take Miss Carter's name out. She's no longer premiere dancer or anything else of the Ballet de la Hot. She's out. Fired. Canned!"

"But, for heaven's sake, Mr. Hathaway . . ." Hoke began imploringly.

"Never mind," Philip roared. "Do as I say or you'll be the next one I fire."

"Yes, Mr. Hathaway," said Hoke in a small voice.

Philip slammed down the telephone. He felt better already.

He leered at Jane whose red hair and sparkling eyes were enticing and beckoning.

"You're so masterful," she told him admiringly.

Philip came over and sat down beside her. He patted her knee. "At least I can get things done when I make up my mind."

"Philip," she said coyly, "can't you make one more decision? Now that you own O'Brien's saloon you ought really to put Larry back on the job. You want the place to make money, I know, and he is a drawing card these days."

"For your sake I might," he said, his mind clicking rapidly. "But I'm beginning to think of bigger things for you. How much does Brooks mean to you?"

"He's a good friend."

"Is that all?"

"I guess so," she smiled.

"Then forget about him. O'Brien's going to manage the place until I replace him. He told me himself that he wanted to go to Florida and open up a business there. I'll be needing someone to run the saloon."

He looked at Jane steadily, a half smile on his lips. She stared back, her eyes growing wider. Suddenly she got the idea.

"You mean, you might want me?"

"After working there as you have, you ought to know the business pretty well."

"Oh, Philip!"

"Shall we seal the bargain with a little kiss?" he asked.

It developed into more than just another kiss. Even as it did Jane Vollmer realized the possibilities. With Philip's backing she could make a fortune. There would be none of this Third Avenue stuff for her very long. She'd get him to open up a real high class joint, over in the plush night club district. She could, if she wanted, hire Larry as an entertainer at a fabulous price. Or she might find someone else. Who could tell?

"Shall we go out to dinner now, my dear?" asked Philip an hour and a half later.

Jane straightened her stockings. "I'd love to."

"The Stock suit you?"

"Why not? Money's no object," she grinned.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE news of Constance Carter's break with the Ballet du Roi hit the streets in the early editions the next morning. All accounts of it recalled the incident in O'Brien's saloon and all guesses were that the two events were directly related. Miss Carter could not be reached for a statement. Neither could Philip Hathaway, president of the du Roi Association.

No one thought to look for Philip in Jane Vollmer's room over his newly purchased property. No one was successful in getting by the faithful Yvonne who refused to disturb her mistress who had arrived home very late with Mr. Brooks.

At noon, however, Yvonne thought it well to acquaint Connie with what was going on. She knocked discreetly at the door.

"What is it?" Connie called happily.

The little French maid cleared her throat. "I think you ought to know what all the papers are carrying, mademoiselle."

"All right. We'll be out shortly. Get some breakfast ready, please."

Yvonne set the table for two and had freshly made coffee and toast waiting. She also had two papers folded to the account of Connie's severance from her job. She trembled as Connie breezed in a moment later, followed by Mr. Brooks.

"What's this about something in the paper, Yvonne?" Connie asked brightly.

"There it is, mademoiselle." She pointed to the papers.

Connie's eyes widened at the headline. Her face got darker as she read the article. Her eyes blazed when she finished and she had to purse her lips to hold back the invectives.

"The skunk!" she screamed.

Larry read the article. When he finished he looked at Connie helplessly. "What else did you expect?"

"The fool is cutting off his nose to spite his face," Connie called. "The Ballet is purely a business proposition. Yet he pulls a trick like this just when it starts to pay off. Oh the dummies. The idiot!"

"It wasn't all business for Philip," Larry remarked whimsically. "I knew no good would come out of all this."

"He must be out of his mind," Connie speculated.

"No," said Larry shaking his head. "My guess is he just got his mind back."

Connie paid no attention to what he said. She stormed into the living room. Larry and Yvonne exchanged helpless glances. He turned and followed Connie.

"Connie," he pleaded with her. "Can't you see now what I meant? It just wasn't meant to be. Our love has been fatal. It might always be that way. It didn't matter about me being fired because the job was nothing to begin with. But look at the awful thing that's happened to you."

"Oh shut up. Do you think this bothers me for a second. I'm planning what I'm going to do, and believe me Philip will regret it."

"But—"

"I'll start a new show," Connie declared, her eyes narrow. "I'll make the Ballet du Roi look sick. The public came to see me do that Libretto thing. Well, I'll do it again and the new routine number as well. I'll show Philip Hathaway a thing or two."

Just then the buzzer sounded and Yvonne started to the door. "I'm not in to anybody!" Connie snapped.

Yvonne received an envelope at the door. She brought it to Connie, who glanced at it a moment then tore the end off. She pulled out a letter and read it grimly.

The management of the apartment hotel expressed their regrets but they had just been informed that Mr. Philip Hathaway, in whose name the apartment was held, had given notice that Miss Carter was to vacate the premises at the end of the month.

"Damn him!" cried Connie in a rage. "Now I will get even! He'll be hollering 'mele' at the top of his lungs when I get through with him."

Larry picked up the note from the coffee table where Connie had dropped it. He read it through regretfully.

"At least you've got two weeks before the end of the month," he said sympathetically.

Things were moving entirely too fast for Larry. But he wasn't surprised. Connie had loved him to her own destruction. Her world was falling down about her ears. It would be a terrific shock to her when she finally realized what had happened. He could only admire her now for her determination to fight

back. But her fight was hopeless. She could accomplish nothing against a man with Philip Hathaway's resources.

"Look, Connie, maybe it isn't too late. For your own sake forget me. I'm no good for you. Can't you see?" he implored.

"Bring the coffee in here, Yvonne," Connie ordered. She sat down on the divan and fumed.

"As I was saying," Larry tried again. "This whole thing is a calamity for you."

"It's nothing of the sort! Now quit yapping. I've got work to do."

Suddenly Larry straightened up. She was carrying on as if he were not a part of this at all. "Listen to me," he said sternly, "you're making me feel like a gigolo. You'd better start getting that out of your head right now."

Connie glanced up at him. Her eyes showed surprise. "I wasn't even thinking about anything like that."

"If you're going to live with me, then you'll live as I do. I've been trying to tell you that all along. I've tried to make you see what you were getting into. But not! You wouldn't listen. Get your feet on the ground. You've thrown a millionaire overboard for a two bit muckman. As my wife you'll live on my income. Not on yours."

"I understand that," said Connie. There was a new and wondrous look in her eyes as she stared up at him.

"Then what's all this talk about what you're going to do. Do you think I'm just going to twiddle my thumbs in the meantime?" he asserted.

"Of course not, darling," she soothed. "The new ballet will be a joint effort. You'll take care of all the music. I'll handle the dance end of it."

Larry studied her dubiously. "Okay, then. Start talking about us. Not you."

"I love you more than ever," Connie beamed as she stood up and kissed him. "We'll go to work at once."

At two-thirty that afternoon they sat in a small but expensively furnished office two stories above Fifth Avenue. The office belonged to Gray Arkers, the theatrical producer. He was a big man. He gave Larry a pleasant smile when Connie introduced them, then forgot he existed.

"It's a pretty ambitious project," he commented after Connie had outlined her plan for a new ballet company.

"But we can't miss, Guy," said Connie. "The Ballet du Roi is on the slide. You watch."

Ackers smiled. "Ballet has never been exactly my line, Connie. I'd rather see you in one of my new shows. You've got a name and a reputation. Why don't you consider a contract with me instead?"

"Because I want a ballet of my own," said Connie, determinedly.

Larry, seated on the other side of the desk, glanced at her. A ballet of her own? Connie and Ackers talked on for a while. The net result was that Ackers was not interested in putting money in such a new project. Just before they left he again reminded Connie that he'd gladly sign her to a contract if she changed her mind.

Their next stop was in the office of Barnaby Monroe. Monroe brushed Larry off with a glance as they shook hands, then spent the next hour talking with Connie. Monroe was interested in Connie's project but didn't have any spare money to sink at the moment. That was the upshot of the meeting with Monroe.

Undismayed Connie led Larry to two more producers. Only one was mildly serious about going into the project with her. But he couldn't do a thing for at least ninety days due to previous commitments.

At six-thirty they stood on the sidewalk on Vanderbilt Avenue across from Grand Central. Connie suggested they run up to "El" for dinner but Larry shook his head.

"We'll eat in Thompson's around the corner. It's the best I can afford."

"But Larry, I've got money," said Connie reasonably.

"We're going to eat at Thompson's," he said gruffly.

After dinner Connie announced that she was going to phone some other producers and see if they couldn't get together this evening for further discussion of a new ballet. Larry smiled at her mirthlessly.

"We spent the afternoon on your business. Tonight we're going to attend to mine."

"But this is your business too," she said puzzled at his remark.

"Hops. We're going to visit some honky tonks and see about getting me a job as a piano player."

Connie put up a bust about that at once. He wasn't showing a very good sense of proportion. What was more important, a new ballet or a job in a honky tonk?

"Really, darling," she said, "I don't get your point."

"The most important thing to me is my job," Larry resorted.

"But you're in the deal with me."

He gave a hollow laugh. "None of those men today even knew I was along."

"They will. I'll see to that," she asserted.

"Nevertheless we're going to spend this evening finding me a job," he said with finality.

Connie hadn't seen so many different dives since her own search for employment during her early days in New York. Larry was acquainted with several of the owners or managers they talked with. Every one of them, meeting the famous Constance Carter for the first time, insisted on buying drinks.

They wound up at one o'clock in a basement cafe in Greenwich Village. The manager, a Mr. Vesecov, offered him a job starting next week and magnanimously offered Connie a like salary if she'd dance there.

"I might take you up on that someday, Mr. Vesecov," Connie laughed. Despite the fact that the evening hadn't turned out as she had planned, she was mellow from the drinks they'd had and highly pleased that Larry had found employment.

"There's an idea, Connie," Larry grinned. "Instead of me going into the ballet business with you, you get into the night club trade with me."

"Shame!"

Connie stuck out her hand in mock solemnity. When his hand touched hers she squeezed it lovingly. Their eyes met for a second, but they spoke much. The rest of the night was before them and suddenly they both had the same thing in mind. They smiled at each other. It was time to go.

Larry made final arrangements with Mr. Vesecov and they left. A taxi picked them up and Larry gave the driver his address.

"But why go there, honey?" Connie asked. "My place is much more convenient and—"

"You're living with me just as soon as we can arrange to make it legal," said Larry.

"Yes, but why spend the night over O'Brien's saloon when we can be cozy and comfortable in a much nicer place?"

"You might as well start getting used to living like that," he replied.

Connie was silent as the taxi fled through the night up a darkened street. When she spoke her voice had taken on more insistence. "Look, sweetie, all my things are at my place."

"But none of mine are," he said lightly.

Connie was silent for two more blocks. "I don't want to sleep there," she said flatly.

Larry's eyebrows shot up. He looked around at her stuffily. "And I don't want to sleep in an apartment that Philip Hathaway is paying for. Understand?"

She would have bought that deal. But the inflection of his final word, the way he said "Understand?" put Connie on her muscle. Larry was being entirely too domineering all of a sudden.

"We'll move out of there at the end of the month. Meanwhile, there isn't any reason at all why we shouldn't use it. After all, the apartment is mine for the next two weeks," said Connie evenly.

"Yeah, but how did you earn it?"

The words got out before Larry could think. He was sorry the instant he said them. That wasn't the usual. He began an immediate apology but Connie cut him off.

"No!" she exclaimed, sitting bolt upright in the taxi. "That's how you feel. Well! Maybe we'd better review this whole thing."

"Now look, Connie—"

"Look nothing! I'm giving up everything for you. I'm willing to start all over and work my fingers to the bone to make it possible . . ."

Larry blurted. "What do you mean—you're going to work to make that possible. I'm the one who's going to pay the freight in this family."

"Alright, you are. But until you've become successful, I'm the one who's going to have to really produce!"

The taxi stopped in front of O'Brien's. The argument had become rather violent by now. The driver got his money and drove off hurriedly, leaving them standing on the sidewalk in front of the saloon.

"You're being bullheaded," said Connie, folding her arms defiantly.

"You're the one who's stubborn," he shouted back at her.

"I'm not."

"You are."

Connie said, "You're content to be mediocre. That's your trouble."

Larry said, "Nuts!"

They stared at each other. Behind the pride and the hurt in them was heartbreak. Yet neither would give in. Neither would make the first break. The impasse might have gone on indefinitely, had not O'Brien chanced to glance through the window at that moment. He went to the door and called them.

"Hi, kids. Come on and have a drink. This is my last night."

Still deadlocked, they turned in silence and entered. A drink was welcomed by both. At a table in the rear of the establishment sat Ginger Doss, Robison Walker and Philip Hathaway. Ginger was the first to spy Connie and Larry.

"Well, look who's here!" she cried with amusement.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"HAVE you heard the good news?" O'Brien inquired as he walked with them toward a booth in the back.

Neither Connie nor Larry said anything. They hadn't heard any good news. Not in the past twenty minutes.

"I'm leaving for Florida tomorrow."

"Who's going to manage the place while you're gone?" said Larry.

"Jane."

Connie came alive at that. "Jane Vollmer?"

O'Brien nodded. Just then they passed the table where Philip sat with his friends. Connie noticed them for the first time. She stopped.

"Well, Philip," she said, "I've just heard that you've branching out. Congratulations. I hope Jane will make you a good manager."

Philip's heart skipped a beat in the presence of his lost love. Jane might prove more faithful than Connie, but she could never equal the dancer's beauty and fire. He arose.

"We might as well all remain friends. Why don't you two sit down here with us?"

Connie accepted the invitation. She did it mainly to spite Larry. They couldn't very well continue their argument in front of these people. Maybe he'd cool off and be more amenable.

"I trust you've found another connection, Mr. Brooks," said Philip while they waited for some drinks.

"Yes, I'm starting next week in a joint down in the Village."

"And what are your plans, Connie?"

"I don't know," she answered with a lift of her chin.

Again a pang of remorse shot through Philip. Giving Connie the old heave ho hadn't been as easy as he thought. It grieved him to think of her at loose ends. With nothing to do. No place to go. She was so lovely, so proud, so completely feminine.

"We'll be down to hear you play one of these nights, Larry," Ginger spoke up.

"Fine. I hope all my friends will drop around."

Their highballs were served and everyone drank a toast to Larry's new job. Ginger prattled on merrily with Robbin and Philip adding an occasional remark. Larry and Connie were strangely silent. Ginger was the first to notice this and a malicious glint came into her sparkling eyes.

"What goes on between you two? Anything wrong?" asked the blonde, glancing with amusement from one to the other.

Robbin kicked Ginger's ankle under the table. But even with that distraction Ginger did not fail to catch Connie's look as she raised her glass. She also noticed the oblique, half-smile Larry cast at the dancer. Ginger knew something was there. Knew it for sure.

"There's nothing wrong that a good night's sleep wouldn't cure," Larry mused then drained his glass.

"Provided one can sleep in good beds," Connie said acidly.

Philip blinked. Even he could see that all was not well

between the two. A flicker of hope arose inside him. He ordered Larry another drink. In the space of ten minutes he ordered him two more.

Connie had not reckoned with liquor when she had sat down at Philip's table. Larry was on his way to getting drunk. She realized this all of a sudden, when Ginger Doss asked him to play the piano. Larry stood up instantly, swaying a little.

"Good ol' piano," he muttered, squinting at the upright over in the corner. "Won't see you any more after tonight." He plodded over to it and sat down heavily on the stool. He began to play his nostalgic ragtime.

Connie remained at the table. She contained her bitterness for fifteen minutes, then got up and went over to him.

"Larry, don't you think we'd better go now?"

He glanced up at her, an inebriated grin on his face. He began to laugh loudly. What Connie didn't know was that his laughter was covering the agony in his heart. For through his dulled senses Larry had finally and at least reached a firm conclusion. The little spat he'd had with Connie tonight had convinced him that their love could never be. He had known it all along but had forgotten it under the influence of Connie's overwhelming personality, the spell of her great beauty.

"I'll go with you, Larry," she said meekly.

"Aw forget it, Connie," he mumbled, as he played. "Forget everything. I'm not your kind. Never will be."

Horror and desperation spread over Connie's face. "You mean," she said spacing her words, "you don't want—you don't want me?" It had started out as a question but ended up as a statement.

"Maybe that's it," he said, his mind whirling.

Connie was stunned. She stood there a moment in a daze.

Slowly she turned, hardly knowing what she was doing. Like a sleepwalker she moved toward Philip's table. But she didn't stop. She kept right on going toward the door of the saloon. The next moment she disappeared into the night.

"Where's she going?" Philip cried in alarm.

"Maybe just out to get some fresh air," Ginger suggested.

"I—I'd better go see if she's all right."

Philip got up and ran after her. Outside in the darkness he

saw her dim figure heading slowly down Third Avenue. He caught up with her.

"Connie, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just want to walk. Walk and walk," she said, hardly realizing it was Philip beside her.

"But you oughtn't to be out by yourself at this hour. I'm going with you."

Connie didn't reply and Philip took that to mean that his presence met with her approval. He moved along beside her in silence. They disappeared into the night down Third Avenue.

About that time Larry finished playing. The liquor had so benumbed him that he could no longer feel the ivories. He staggered back to the table and joined Ginger and Robbin. O'Brien brought him another drink.

"Jane," he muttered. "Where's she?"

"Getting settled in a new apartment tonight, over on Madison," O'Brien informed him. "She moved out from upstairs this afternoon."

All at once Larry had the feeling he had lost everything. He grabbed up the fresh drink and with a foolish wink at Ginger and Robbin drained it. Half an hour later he was still sitting there with them, his eyes glazed.

"The guy's out," Ginger observed, looking at him.

"We'd better get going, don't you think?" Robbin suggested.

"But we can't leave him here in this condition."

Robbin shrugged. "It's not our affair."

"Isn't it?" The blonde glanced at him significantly. "Do you want Connie moving back in on Philip and messing up that contract of yours, and everything else?"

"No."

"Then come on. Let's get Larry out of here."

Suddenly Robbin got the idea. They got on either side of Larry and lifted him up. His legs were like rubber but they got him outside and into a taxi. The piano player hadn't the slightest notion of what was going on. He was out cold.

"We'll deliver him, with our compliments, to Connie," Ginger laughed as the taxi pulled away from the curb.

At that same time Philip's feet were beginning to feel as if he'd been marching for weeks without rest. He and Connie were all the way down to Forty-Second Street. She turned east and

Philip followed her doggedly. Across from the Daily News building he finally spoke out.

"I'm about to drop, Connie. Can't we rest for a minute?"

She shrugged. They happened to be in front of an all night beauty at the moment. To Philip it looked like the promised land. He motioned toward it and when Connie raised no objections he gratefully poked her inside.

They sat on stools at the counter and downed two cups of black coffee. Philip's strength was restored. Presently he turned a questioning eye to Connie.

"What's this all about? Why did you want to leave O'Brien's?"

Connie stared dully ahead of her. It was a moment before she replied. "I just wanted to, that's all."

"Something go wrong back there?" he asked cautiously.

"Nothing matters any more. Nothing at all."

Philip pondered this information. He sensed, without knowing exactly why, that opportunity was knocking at the door. Suddenly he dared hope that all might not be lost. Given a choice he still preferred the glamorous Connie to any girl.

"Listen, Connie. I made a deal with Jane Vollmer but I can handle that. Would you—Do you think we could turn over a new leaf? Let bygones be bygones?"

"I don't care," said Connie. She had sunk into such depths of dependency that she didn't even know what she was saying.

Philip's hopes soared. His heart pounded wildly when he came to the full realization that his reward was a lot closer than he had suspected.

"Shall we go now, my dear?" he asked quietly.

It didn't make any difference to Connie. Philip hurriedly paid the check. His excitement grew as she accompanied him docilely outside and entered a cab with him.

"I want to go home," Connie said in a small voice.

Philip gave the driver her address and told him to hurry. A few minutes later they were let into Connie's apartment by Yvonne who stared at them both wide-eyed. Philip was beside himself with joy. Gladfully he thought of the power of his money. It has triumphed in the end as always.

"But, mademoiselle—" Yvonne exclaimed, glancing fearfully toward the bedroom. "Mr. Walker and—"

"Nothing matters, Yvonne," Connie interrupted. "Please. Just don't wake me at all tomorrow."



## CROSSROADS OF DESIRE

Connie started toward the bedroom. Philip pinched the little French maid's cheek and beamed. He gave her a large wink and then took off after Connie. Yvonne stared after them, fascinated with terror.

Connie turned on her light. She dropped her coat from her shoulders. At that moment Philip entered the room behind her. But the next second he was startled as Connie let out a little cry. To his amazement she ran across the room.

"Larry!" Connie cried with a mixture of gratitude and jubilation.

Philip was struck dumb. His eyes were riveted on the sleeping piano player. A storm gathered in the eyes of the President of the Hathaway Lock and Bolt Company of New England. He let out a roar as he damned the premiere danseuse of the Ballet du Roi to eternal fire and brimstone. Philip turned and stormed out of the apartment forever.

"O my darling, my darling!" Connie cried, out of her mind with happiness. She flung herself down beside Larry.

He groaned. His eyes came open long enough to recognize Connie. He smiled contentedly but managed to lift a numb arm and get it about her shoulder. Then he went back to sleep as she showered his face with kisses.

Yvonne smiled as she closed the door and hurried to her Gene who was hiding in the kitchen.

## THE END

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